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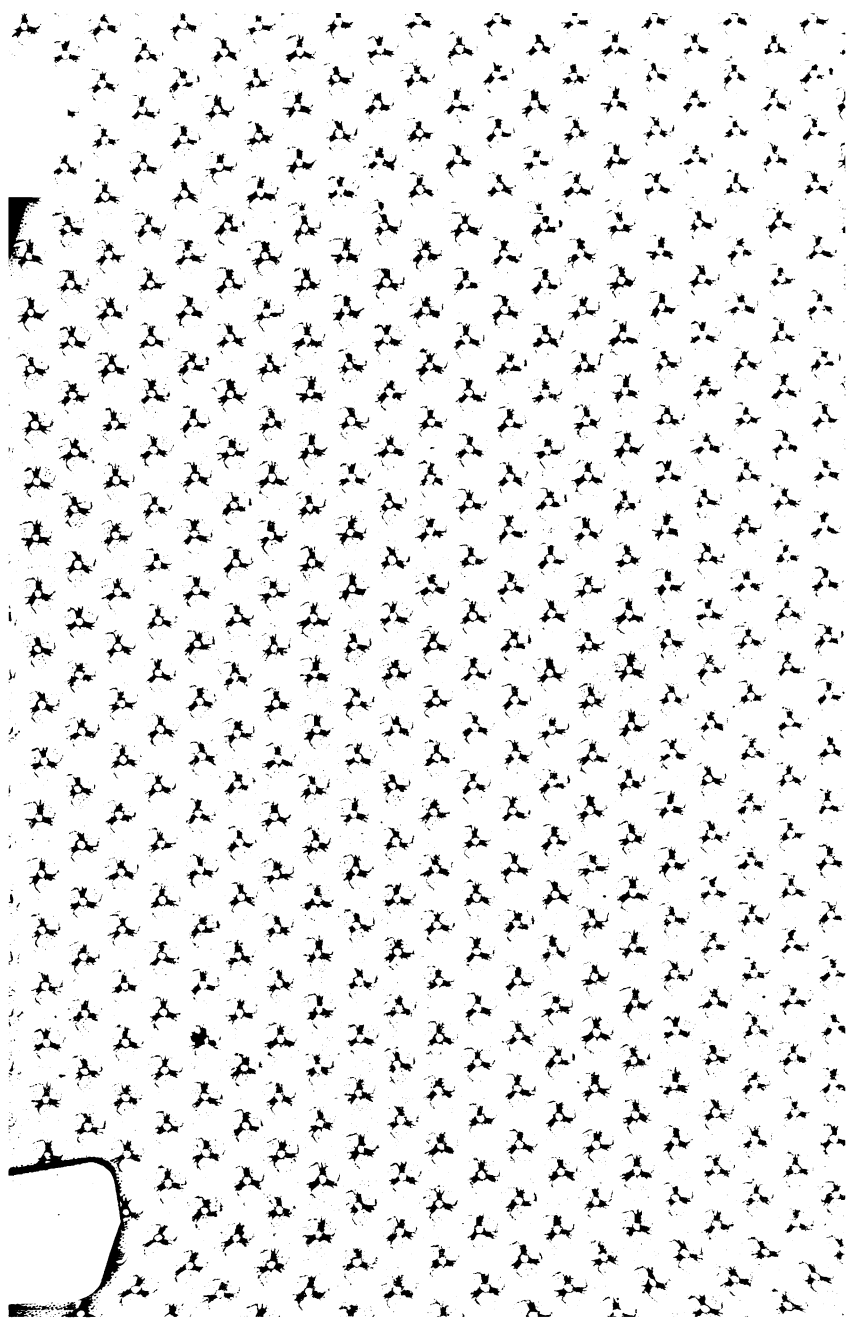
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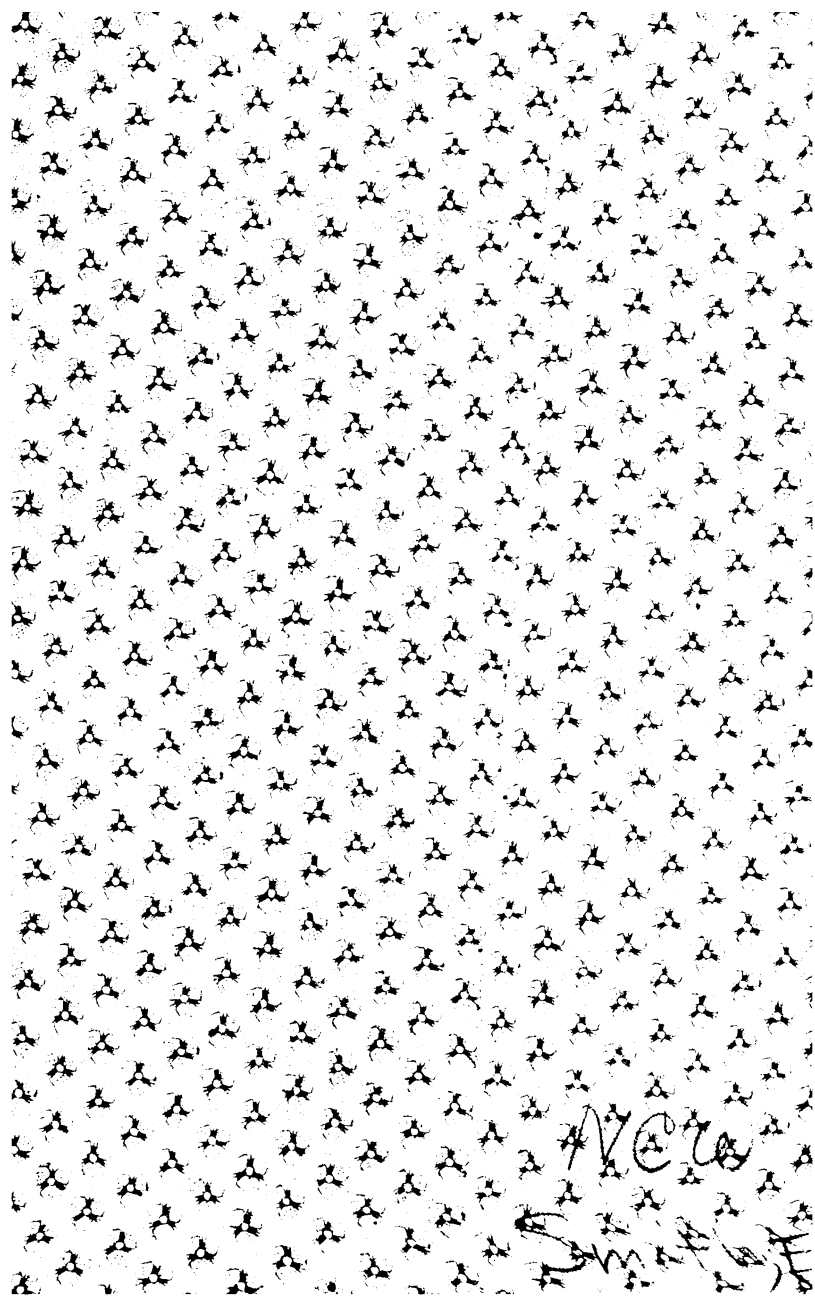
JILL 

A FLOWER GIRL

by

L. T. MEADE



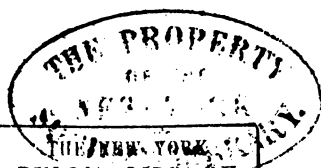


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JILL



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“What do you think them
flowers are worth to me?”

Page 109.

J. H. OWSEND.





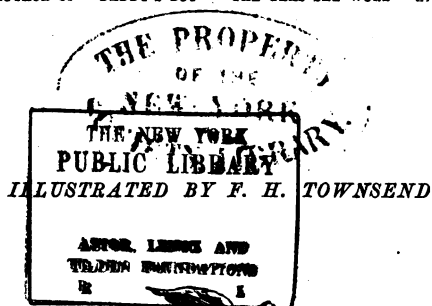
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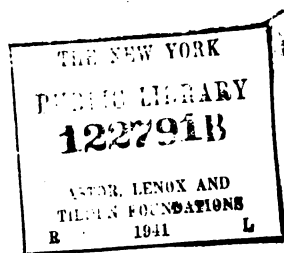
AUTHOR OF "DADDY'S BOY" "THE GEMS SHE WORE" ETC.



NEW YORK
THOMAS WHITTAKER
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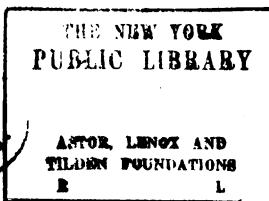


LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

	PAGE
1. "WHAT DO YOU THINK THEM FLOWERS ARE WORTH TO ME?"	<i>Frontispiece.</i>
2. "I'LL PAY YOU ALL OUT FOR THIS, NEIGHBOURS, SEE EF I DON'T"	17
3. "YOU LOOK A TIDY SORT"	35
4. "IT'S MOLLY MALONEY"	45
5. "HERE, LITTLE MISSY, YOU GIVE ME THEM POSIES AND TAKE THESE"	55
6. "LOOK YERE," HE SAID, "EF YEE DON'T GO 'ARF, I'LL SCREECH OUT"	93
7. "SEEMS TO ME THAT THERE MUST BE A GOD"	133
8. "JILL WAS STANDING OUTSIDE, LEANING WEARILY AGAINST THE POST OF THE DOOR"	149
9. "I WALKED THE REST OF THE WAY"	153
10. "GOOD-BYE, NAT"	165

11. "SHALL I TAKE YER TO THE NEAREST PUBLIC?"	181
12. "WOT'S THIS HEAR, SILAS, THAT YOU'RE GOING TO CON-TRACT MARRIAGE WITH AN UNBELIEVER?"	189
13. "EF YOU SAY-THAT AGAIN I'LL KNOCK YER DOWN"	239
14. "FELL ASLEEP WHERE HE SAT IN JILL'S CHAIR	255





CHAPTER I.



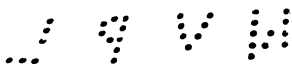
HE London season was at its height. The weather was warm and sultry, the days were at their longest. The shops were gay with beautiful dresses, richly trimmed bonnets, gloves, parasols, hats—the thousand and one pretty articles of usefulness and beauty which are considered indispensable by the people who drive about in carriages and live in the large houses in the West End of London.

The time was night, and the more important shops were shut, but the great houses in Grosvenor Square revealed at this moment their fullest and most brilliant life, for this was the time when the great receptions of the season were given.

Before one of the largest and most important of these mansions a small crowd had collected. It was the sort of crowd who are fond of getting peeps inside the lovely palaces which they must not enter. Rough-

looking boys, eager, pinched women, a few men, and even some babies were present. They jostled one another, and each in turn tried to force his or her way to the front rank. They made remarks freely with regard to the people who were going inside the house. The beautiful girls and richly dressed matrons called for their outspoken admiration. The men of princely mien and irreproachable attire caused the ragged girls and thin women to think timidly that fairy tales were true, and that real princes did live on the earth. The guests went up the carpeted steps, and disappeared one by one into the mansion. The people in the crowd scarcely breathed as they watched them. How the ladies did trail their long and exquisite robes ! How like angels the girls in white looked, how like queens and princesses the older women appeared, how kingly were the gentlemen who accompanied them ! Yes, the spectacle was a fairy one ; it was delightful to enjoy it all for nothing.

The crowd were in an excellent humour, and did not mind when the policeman somewhat roughly pushed them back. All things considered, they enjoyed themselves quite as well as the people who went into the house, they were not jealous or envious in the least. Standing in front of this motley crowd, so much in front that the brilliant gaslight fell full upon their eager upturned faces, might have been seen a tall girl of about sixteen, and two boys a little younger. The girl was very upright, quite clean in



her person, and not only neat, but picturesque in her dress. A many-coloured cotton scarf was twisted in the form of a turban round her head ; a large apron of the same material nearly covered her black dress. On her arm she carried a large flat basket filled with roses, narcissus, forget-me-nots, and other summer flowers. Her eyes were very dark and bright, her hair black, her complexion a pure olive. She was not only a handsome girl, but her whole effect was intensely foreign and picturesque. Her carriage was so upright, her simple pose so stately, that one or two ladies and some of the men who were going into the mansion were attracted by her appearance, and remarked her to one another.

The girl gazed after them, her black eyes wide open, her lips slightly parted, an eager, hungry expression all over her face. The two boys who stood with her kept nudging each other, and whispering together, and making remarks, some under their breath, some out loud, with regard to the gay company who were going into the house.

The girl never spoke. Even when her brothers pushed her roughly, she only moved a little away from them in absolute silence.

"I say, Jill"—the elder of the lads gave the young flower-girl a more violent shove than usual—"be yer goin' to stay here all night? Most of the folks have come by now, I reckon, and we'd best be moving on ; there's going to be no end of fun

presently at that big house over there by the corner."

Jill shook herself, stared eagerly at the speaker, and then said, in a quick, impassioned voice,

"I never see'd nothing like this afore, Bob. Sech dresses, sech faces. Oh, the light and grandeur of it all! I've pictured it of course lots and lots o' times, but I never see'd it afore."

"I told yer it 'ud be fine," replied Bob; "come on, you'll see more of the same sort at the big house at the corner. You take my 'and, Jill, and let us run. We'll get in front of the crowd ef we are quick."

"No," said Jill, "I don't want to see no other crowd. There were angels and princes and princesses going into that 'ere house. I don't want to see nothink more—my head's full o' the sight, and my eyes sort o' dazzled. I'm goin' 'ome now to mother; I ha' a power o' news to tell her."

She turned away as she spoke, moving quickly through the crowd with her free, stately step.

Many people turned to look at her, but she did not appear to see them. Even when one or two called to her to stop and sell some of her flowers, she did not pay the least attention.

The gay streets where the grand folks lived were quickly passed, and Jill found herself in a poor and squalid neighbourhood. The hour was late, but these streets were all alive as if it were noon. Children

quarrelled and played in them, women gossiped, men lounged out of the public-houses, stared at Jill and called after her as she walked quickly by.

A child tumbled down in front of her path and lay screaming and rubbing its dirty little face in a puddle. This sight caused her to stop ; she stooped, picked up the little creature, gave it a fully blown rose from her basket and walked on again.

At last she reached a large corner building which was let out in flats to poor people. She turned in here, ran up the stairs lightly and quickly, until she reached the top landing, there she stopped before a rudely-painted door.

The door had a knocker, which Jill sounded loudly. There was no response whatever from within. She turned a little pale at this, put down her ear to the keyhole, and listened eagerly. Not a sound reached her from the other side of the closed door. She knocked once again, then putting her lips to the keyhole, she called through it in a high, sweet voice :

"It's me, mother ; it's Jill ! Open the door, please, mother, I ha' lots of news."

No response came to this petition. The same absolute, unbroken silence reigned inside the room. Jill paused to consider for a moment. The exalted dreamy look left her face ; a certain sharpness, mingled with anxiety, filled her black eyes. After a very brief pause, during which she watched the

closed door with a kind of sad patience, she picked up her basket and ran down to the next landing. The door here had a neat little knocker, which was polished and shining. Jill gave a single knock, and then waited for a reply. It came almost immediately. A woman with a night-cap on opened the door, uttered an exclamation at sight of the girl, put out her hand to draw her into the room, and spoke in a voice of agitation :

"You don't mean to tell me, Jill Robinson, that yer mother ain't 'ome yet? Why the——"

"Don't say any more!" exclaimed Jill, eagerly. "I'm goin' out to look for mother. She's maybe took faint, or something o' that sort. Will you take care of my flowers till I come back, Mrs. Stanley?"

"Need you ask, honey? You lay 'em in there in the cool. You 'asn't sold too many to-day, Jill. What a full basket!"

"Yes, but they're mostly buds. They'll look lovely to-morrow when I freshens 'em up. Now I must go to look for mother."

"This ain't a fit hour for a girl like you to be out, Jill."

"Any hour's fit when a girl can take care on herself," responded Jill, proudly.

She ran quickly downstairs, leaving her flowers in the passage of Mrs. Stanley's little flat. Just outside the door of the big building she came upon a motley crowd of men and women. They were eagerly

gazing at something which excited at once their amusement and derision.

The crowd was too thick for Jill to see what attracted them, but a sound, full, strong, and sweet, drew her attention. She was walking quickly past the people, but this sound arrested her steps. It caused the colour to flame into her cheeks, and an angry light to leap out of her eyes. With a rapid, deft movement she pushed her way through the people. She guessed, even before her eyes assured her of the fact, what was the matter.

"Go it again, Poll Robinson!" shouted the men. "Oh! you took that note prime. You never wor in better voice. Go it again, my beauty! Now then, let's listen, all of us, to handsome Poll Robinson. You give us another song, Poll, now then."

A tall, powerfully-built woman of about five-and-thirty was standing in the middle of the street; her bonnet was pushed on one side of her head, her dress was slovenly, her steps sadly unsteady. She was trying to dance for the benefit of the assembled company, and at the same time was sending up full rich notes, from a throat of vast compass, into the summer night.

The song she sang was "Cherry Ripe." The crowd jostled one another, and applauded her loudly. When Jill burst like a young Fury into their midst, one or two of the men, and some of the

women, were joining with hearty abandon in the chorus :

“ Cherry ripe, cherry ripe,
Ripe, I cry—
Full and fair ones,
Come and buy ! ”

“ Go it, Poll, go it ! ” they shouted again. “ That’s better ! that’s prime ! Wish I could buy ’em, makes my mouth water to hear on ’em. Oh ! you are in fine voice to-night, Poll Robinson.”

“ You let her be,” said Jill. “ Oh ! for shame ain’t you cowards ? Don’t you see as she don’t know rightly what she’s doing ? Oh ! I ’ate you—I ’ate you all. Don’t you see for yourselves she’s took mor’n she ought ? Do you think she would sing to you like that ef she knew the reason why ? No one ever tried harder to be good than poor mother. She never takes a drop except when the pain’s too bad to be borne. Oh ! ain’t you cowards, every single one on yer ? Here, mother, come home with me at once. You make way, you bad, cowardly men and women. Go home to your own beds, and let mother and me go to ours. Come along, mother, it’s Jill ! Come home with me at once. No, you ain’t to sing any more. I’ll pay you all out for this, neighbours, see ef I don’t.”

She took the woman under her wing, and, going quickly through the astonished, half-cowed, half-amused people, entered the house.

"I'll pay you all out for this, neighbours, see ef I don't."





CHAPTER II.



JILL pulled her mother's hand fiercely inside her arm. The presence of the angry, upright girl had a sobering effect on the older woman. A dim sense of shame and distress was stealing over her. She made violent efforts to keep from tottering, and, raising one powerful but shaking hand, tried to straighten her bonnet.

Jill walked past Mrs. Stanley's flat, without stopping to fetch her basket of flowers. When she reached the top landing of the house she slipped her hand into her mother's pocket, took out the key which lay there, and opened the door which led into the little flat. The flat consisted of two rooms and a narrow passage.

Still holding her mother by the arm, Jill went into the outer room. She found a box of matches, and, striking one, lit a candle which was placed on the round table.

"Now, mother, sit down," she said, in a tender voice. "Here's your own chair. Sit right down and rest a bit. I'll be no time boiling the kettle, and then we'll have a cup o' tea both on us together; you'll feel a sight better when you have had your tea, mother."

The woman sat on the edge of the chair which Jill had pulled forward, she loosened her bonnet-strings, and let her untidy, disorderly bonnet fall off her head of thick black hair.

"I'll never go and do it any more, Jill," she said, after a pause. "The pain's better now, and next time it comes I'll bear it. I know I'm tipsy now, but, sure as my name's Poll Robinson, you'll see, Jill, as I'll never go and do it again."

"To be sure you won't, mother. Don't you fret. Forget all about it—forget as you were tipsy jest now in the street. You'll soon be as right as ever you wor. I'll fetch some cold water to bathe your face and hands, then you'll feel prime. You cheer up, mother, darlin', and forget what you 'as done."

"But you won't forget it, Jill. I've shamed you before the folk in the street, you can't go and forget it, it's contrary to nature."

"Why I'se forgot it, mother, already; you sit quiet, and let me tend you."

While Jill spoke she bustled about, placed the kettle of water on the little gas-stove to boil, and, going out into the passage, filled a basin full of cold

water from a tap. Bringing it back, she tenderly washed her mother's hot face and hands, combed back her disordered hair, coiled it deftly round her comely head, and then, bending down, kissed the broad, low forehead.

"Now you're like yourself, so sweet ; why you look beautiful ; you're as handsome as a picter. We'll forget all about that time in the street. See ! the kettle's boiling, we'll both be real glad of our tea."

The woman began to cheer up under the girl's bright influence ; her head ceased to reel, her hand to shake ; she felt instinctively, however, that she had better keep silence, for her brain was still too confused for her to talk sensibly.

The tea was made strong and fragrant. Jill stood by the little mantelpiece while she sipped hers. Her eager eyes watched her mother with an affectionate and sad solicitude.

"Now, mother, you must go to bed at once, and have a good sleep," she said, when the meal was over.

"I didn't mean to go and done it," said the woman again.

"Course you didn't, mother, and you'll never do it no more. Go and lie down now."

"Where are the lads, Jill ?"

"They'll be in presently. It's all right. You lie down ; you look awful spent and worn."

"But the pain's better, my gal."

"That's right. You sleep while you're easy."

"Jill, don't you 'ate your poor wicked old mother?"

"No, mother. I love you better than all the rest of the world put together. Now lie down, and don't fret yourself. I has a sight of fine things to tell you in the morning; but go to sleep now, do!"

The exhausted woman was only too glad to obey. The moment her head touched the pillow, her tired eyes closed and she went off into dreamless slumber.

Jill stole softly from the room, closing the door behind her.

She had scarcely done so before a shuffling, lumbering sound was heard on the landing; the outer door was banged vigorously from without, and rough boys' voices called to Jill to open and let them in.

She flung the door open without a minute's delay.

"Come in," she said, "and take off your boots, and be quiet ef you can, for mother's not well, and I won't have her woke to please anybody. You're both shameful late, and I've half a mind to let you sleep in the passage all night. There's your supper; and now *do* try to be quiet."

The elder boy, called Bob, pulled off his heavy boots and stole across the room. The younger followed his example.

"There's your supper," said Jill. She pointed to two plates, on which some lumps of cold suet pudding were placed. "Do be quick," she said, speaking

petulantly for the first time, "for I'm so tired myself I'm fit to drop."

"Is it true that mother's bad, Jill?" asked the youngest boy, peering up at his sister half anxiously, half wickedly.

"Yes, of course it's true. Mother's often bad. Why do you ask?"

"But old Hastie down in the street, he said that she had gone and—why, what's the matter, Jill? You look so fierce that you quite take the heart out of a fellow."

"You shut up," said Jill. "You whisper in this room one word of what Hastie said, and you'll feel my fist, I can tell you."

"Only it's true, Jill, and you know it," said Bob, putting down his plate, and coming up and standing by his younger brother's side. "You needn't beat the life out of poor Tom for telling the truth. You know that Hastie only spoke the solemn truth, Jill, and you has no call to round on Tom."

"Hastie told a lie," said Jill; "and when Tom quotes his words to me, he tells lies."

"Then mother hasn't been out this evening."

"No; she's been in her bed since two o'clock, orful bad with pain. You're dreadful cruel boys even to doubt her. She's the best mother on this earth. Oh, let *me* see Hastie, and I'll give him a spice of my mind. Now go and lie down, the pair on yer. I'm shamed of yer bringing up them lies."

The boys slouched off, frightened at their sister's blazing cheeks and fiery words. They lay down side by side in an old press bed at one end of the kitchen, and Jill, opening the door, slipped softly down to fetch her flowers from Mrs. Stanley. The old woman was still up. She looked at the girl anxiously.

"You found her then, honey?"

"Oh, yes; quite easy. She was out for a little bit of exercise. She's in bed and asleep a long time back."

"Where you ought to be, Jill. You look fit to drop."

"I ain't then; I'm quite fresh. Where are my flowers?"

"There, dearie. Good night to you, Jill Robinson."

"Good night, Mrs. Stanley. Thank yer for keeping the flowers."

Jill took up her basket and departed. In the passage which belonged to her mother's flat she spent some little time watering her flowers, removing the withered ones, and making her basket look trim and fresh for the morrow.

The clock which belonged to a neighbouring church had struck one long before she laid her head on her pillow.





CHAPTER III.



ABOUT four o'clock on the following morning Mrs. Robinson stirred, opened her eyes and looked around her.

The light was streaming full into the little bedroom. It was clean and fresh, for Jill would permit nothing else. There were no cobwebs to be seen on the walls, and the floor was white with constant scrubbing. The glass in the one small window was washed until it shone, and the little blind, which was neatly pinned across it, was fresh, and in perfect order.

Poll Robinson lay in bed and gazed around her. The scene of the night before had passed completely from her memory, and her mind now was altogether absorbed in wondering how she could outstrip Jill and smuggle some stale flowers, which she had hidden the night before under her bed, into her basket.

Jill never held with these doings, but Poll thought them perfectly justifiable. The way to do a thriving business was to mix the stale goods discriminately with the fresh, and to sell one with the other. Jill would not hear of it, and Poll had to own that Jill by her honesty and method, and by her own bright and spruce appearance, had gained a very tidy connection.

But though Poll liked the money which now flowed in regularly, she sighed more than once for the good old days when she need not scrub her sitting-room nor polish her windows, nor worry herself about her unsold flowers.

The flowers did very well thrust under the bed in the old times, and they sold very well, too, mixed up with fresh bunches the next day.

The neighbouring clock struck a quarter past four, and Mrs. Robinson, with a profound sigh, raised herself on her elbow, and looked at her sleeping daughter.

There was a good deal of resemblance between the mother and child. Both were dark, and had big, brilliant eyes, and masses of raven hair.

The face of the older woman looked young enough this morning. The lines of care, pain, and dissipation had vanished with her last night's sleep. A high colour, partly caused by an inward fever and ache, which scarcely ever left her, gave a false beauty to Poll Robinson's face.

She stooped, kissed Jill on her forehead, and getting out of bed began to dress. She saw that the girl looked tired, and she determined to go to Covent Garden for the fresh flowers herself.

She hastily put on her clothes, and slipping her flowers from under the bed, went out into the kitchen. The boys were snoring loudly in their press bedstead. Poll went across the room, and shook Tom vigorously.

"Look yere," she said, "you tell Jill that I'm fetching the flowers this morning. Tell her to lie easy, and take her sleep out. Do you hear me, you good-for-naught? Do you hear what I'm saying? or are ye too sleepy to take it all in?"

"I hear right enough, mother," replied Tom, rubbing his sleepy eyes. "Are you better this morning, mother?"

"Yes, to be sure; why shouldn't I be?"

Tom looked down at Bob, who was asleep. Then he glanced towards the open door of the bedroom. He was not at all afraid of his mother; but he had a wholesome dread of Jill.

"Look yere," he said: "is it true what Hastie says?"

"What did Hastie say?"

Mrs. Robinson placed her arms akimbo.

"He said as you were real bad last night,—real bad—and out in the street, you mind."

"Well, and what ef I wor?"

"Only, Jill says it's a lie. She said she'll smack Hastie for saying it."

Mrs. Robinson's face underwent a quick, queer change.

"Bless Jill," she said. "You lie down and go to sleep, Tom, and don't bother me."

The boy slipped at once under the bed-clothes. He pretended to sleep, but he watched his mother furtively. Seen now in her fresh trim morning dress she was a presentable, and even handsome woman. She put on a coloured apron of the same pattern and design as Jill's, twisted a turban round her head, and taking up her basket prepared to go out.

First of all, however, she went to an old bureau, and pulled open one of the small top drawers. In this drawer she and Jill kept their loose pence and silver. She was looking now for the money to buy the flowers with which she must stock her basket.

She knew that this time yesterday there were three shillings in pence and silver in the drawer. Now when she opened it, nothing whatever in the shape of money was to be seen. A piece of gay print, with which she intended to make an apron for herself, had also vanished.

Poll stood before the empty drawer with astonishment and confusion. Where had the money gone?

She thrust her hand into her pocket. Had she by any chance put it there when she went out to buy drink? If so, it was gone. Her pocket was quite

destitute of the smallest coin. Could she have left the door open when she went out? No, she was quite confident on that point. She had a vivid recollection of locking the door, and taking the key with her.

The money was gone, and she could in no way account for its disappearance. What was she to do? She had not a halfpenny in the world to buy flowers with. Should she wake Jill, and tell her of her loss? No, she did not want to do that. The girl was looking sadly tired, and Poll did not want to confess that through her weakness and want of self-control some of their valuable little earnings had vanished.

She stood for a moment considering. Then she determined to go to the market, and trust to one of the flower merchants giving her sufficient flowers to stock her basket and Jill's on credit. She must start at once, for the morning was passing, and the best and cheapest flowers would be sold.

She opened the door, and closed it softly behind her. Then she ran with a quick, light step downstairs. No one would have recognised this trim and active woman for the disreputable-looking creature whom Jill had rescued the night before.

She quickly passed the buildings where their little flat was, and entered the low neighbourhood of Drury Lane. Drury Lane was a great haunt for flower girls. Poll had lived there herself for years. A memory of the old free life came back to her as she walked, and she could not help breathing a hearty sigh. The

old life seemed attractive to her this morning ; she forgot the blows her cruel husband had given her ; she forgot the dirt, and the sickness, and the misery. She only remembered the absolute freedom from restraint, the jolly, never-may-care sort of existence. Everything was altered now ; for Jill had taken the reins into her own hands. She and her mother belonged to the respectable class of flower girls. They bought good flowers straight from the market, and sold them to regular customers, and had their own acknowledged corner where they could show their wares in tempting and picturesque array. They were clean, decent sort of people now. Poll knew this, but she could not take pride in the fact this morning.

She walked quickly along, with her usual swinging, free sort of motion. Some of her old cronies nodded and smiled to her. Poll was so good-tempered and good-natured that the flower-girls who were still low down, very low down in the world, could not look on her with envy. She would have shared her last crust with the worst of them.

Jill was not nearly so popular as her mother, for Jill was proud, and did not want to know the girls who had been the friends of Mrs. Robinson's youth.

A red-eyed woman, with a bent figure, a white face, and a constant cough, came up and joined Poll as she approached the neighbourhood of the great market.

"And how are you, Betsy ?" asked Poll. "Does your cough hack you as bad as ever ?"

"No, it's better," replied the poor creature. "I bought some of them cough-no-mores, and they seem to still it wonderful. I'm glad I met you, Poll ; I think it wor the good Lord sent you in my way this morning."

The woman gasped painfully as she spoke.

"Here, lean on me, Betsy Peters," said Poll, stopping, and offering her strong arm. "Don't press me, like a good soul, for my side aches orful. Now then, wot is it, Betsy?"

"It certain sure wor the good Lord let me meet yer," repeated Mrs. Peters. "I cried to Him for near an hour last night, and yere's the answer. It's wonderful, that it is."

"Only me and Jill we don't believe in the pious sort," answered Poll. "Not that it matters, ef I can help you, Betsy."

"Yes, but it do matter," replied Mrs. Peters. "It seems a pity, for that sort of belief is a real comfort to poor folk. My word, ain't I held on to it many and many a time? It wor only last night, and I were praying fit to burst my heart, and at larst it seemed to me as ef I see'd Him, His face wondrous pitiful-like, and his smile that encouraging. And I seemed to hear Him a-saying, 'You hold on, Betsy Peters, for you're a'most in Paradise now. You give a good grip o' Me, and I'll land you safe.' My word! it did comfort me. It seemed to lift me out o' myself. It's a pity as you don't hold on to that sort of thing, neighbour."

Poll gave a quick, impulsive sort of sigh.

"Well, I'm glad as you finds the comfort o' it, Betsy," she said. "But what can I do for you? We're most at the market now."

"Ef you could lend me a shilling to buy flowers, neighbour? My man came in drunk last night, and he carried away every penny as I put by in the tin box. There's little Jeanie, she is low and wake, and I've nothing for her breakfast but some tea-leaves that I've watered twice afore. Ef you lend me a shilling, Poll, jest to see me over to-day, I'll pay you back sure and faithful to-morrow morning, so I will."

Poll's handsome face grew dark.

"In course I'd lend it to you, you poor critter," she said, "but I han't got it. You'll scarce believe me when I say that I come out without a penny piece in my pocket. Jill and me, we are well-to-do, as flower girls go, but yesterday some villain of a thief came in and stole our bits of savings. I ha' come out now to ask Dan Murphy to give me flowers on tick. I can't help you, neighbour, however willin' I am."

Mrs. Peters's face turned deadly pale. She pulled her feeble arm away from Poll's and looked at her with trembling lips and eyes that shone through a dim veil of tears.

"Oh, it seems orful," she gasped. "And I made so positive as the Lord wor there, and that He

heard me, and sent you as a hanswer. It seems— it seems as ef—”

“As ef there weren’t no Lord,” repeated Poll.

“No, no ; ef I thought that—” Mrs. Peters turned ghastly, and pressed her hand to her heaving heart.

“And you shan’t, neighbour,” exclaimed Poll, a great wave of crimson spreading over her face. “You shan’t lose your last drop of comfort, not ef I know why. You go and stand round there, neighbour, and I’ll come and share my flowers with you, see ef I don’t. I’ll go on tick for enough for us both. You stand there, Betsy, and wait, I’ll be safe to come back to you.”

Poll vanished almost as she spoke into the crowd of people who were already pressing towards the flower merchants and vendors of vegetables, roots, seeds, fruit, and the other articles sold in the market.

The scene was an intensely busy and lively one. The farmers, who had come up from the country in the quiet hours of the night, had unpacked their wares, and spread them out to the best advantage.

The costermongers and flower girls were eagerly buying, wrangling, chaffering, nudging, and jostling one another. Now and then a high coarse laugh rose on the air, now and then an oath ; sometimes a cry of anger or disappointment.

Poll, threading her way through the thickest of the crowd, approached a stall which belonged to a flower merchant from whom she and Jill constantly bought

their goods. She had little doubt that he would allow her to replenish her own basket and Jill's, and to get a bunch of flowers over and above the quantity she required, for poor Mrs. Peters.

Poll came up confidently.

"Is Dan Murphy here?" she asked of a small boy who stood by the stall, and who looked around him.

"Dan Murphy? Don't yer know?" he exclaimed.

"Don't I know what, you little beggar? Get out of my way, and I'll speak to him myself."

The boy responded to this sally by standing on his head. Then resuming his former upright position, he stuck his tongue in his cheek and winked at Poll.

She raised one vigorous arm to give him a blow across his face, but he dodged her, and vanished.

Her coast was now clear, however. She went up to the stall, which was well stocked with both fruit and flowers, and repeated her question.

"Is Dan Murphy here? I wish to speak to him."

When she asked her question a man with a Jewish type of face stepped forward and replied civilly:

"Can I serve you, ma'am?"

Poll bestowed a withering glance upon this individual.

"No, lad, you can't serve me," she replied. "I want the owner of this stall, Dan Murphy. He's an old crony o' mine."

"You haven't heard then, ma'am, that Murphy has sold his business to me. This stall is mine now."

"My word, but that's a blow." Poll was turning away.

"Can't I serve you, ma'am?" called the new owner of the stall after her.

"No, lad, no; that you can't."

She walked across the market, stepping daintily between long rows of flowering plants and great piles of strawberries, currants, raspberries, and other summer fruits. The air was redolent with the sweet, fresh smell of fruit and flowers; the hawkers were pressing their wares, and customers were rapidly filling their baskets.

Poll thrust her hands deep into the big pockets of her gay apron, and gazed around her.

A vendor with whom she often dealt held up some bunches of pink and white peonies for her inspection. She knew how Jill's face would darken and glow with pleasure over the peonies. What a sight her basket would look filled with these exquisite flowers.

The man had poppies of various colours, too, and any amount of green for decoration.

"Come, missis," he called to Poll. "You won't see flowers like these yere in a hurry, and they're cheap—dirt cheap. You see these poppies; ain't they prime?"

Poll shook her head.

"Don't tempt me," she said. "I ain't got a cent with me, and the only man as 'ud give me flowers on



"You look a tidy sort."

tick has just gone and sold his business. I do call it 'ard."

"So do I," said the owner of the poppies. He was a good-humoured, rosy-faced young farmer. "You look a tidy sort," he said; "not like any o' they—" He pointed with his thumb in a certain direction where a group of slatternly flower girls of the true Drury Lane type were standing. "You don't belong to 'em," he said.

"No, that I don't. Worse luck for me. They ha' got flowers to sell, and I han't any."

"I wouldn't trust the likes o' them with even a penn'orth of flowers on tick," said the farmer.

"And right you are, young man. You keep what you has got and trust no one with goods until you gets money for 'em. Good morning to you."

"But, I say, look you here, missis."

"What is it?"

"You look a tidy sort. Maybe I'll give you some of these poppies. You're safe to sell 'em, and you can pay me to-morrow. Here's a shilling's worth—these pink ones, and some white, and a bunch of green. You bring me the money to-morrow, won't you?"

The young fellow picked up a great bunch of the flowers, thrust them into Poll's hands, and turned to attend to another customer.

She stood still for a moment too surprised to move. Then, with a fierce colour in her cheeks, strode across

the market to the corner where she had asked Betsy Peters to wait for her.

"Yere, Betsy," she said, thrusting all the flowers into the woman's basket, " ef there is a thing as sells, it's a white or a pink poppy. Seems as if the very stingiest of the ladies couldn't stan' up agin' a pink poppy. You'll owe me a shilling for these, Betsy, and you'll pay me when yer can. Good morning to yer ; I'm off back to Jill."





CHAPTER IV.



HEN Poll returned home and showed her empty basket, Jill could not help uttering an exclamation of surprise. "Why, mother, you han't brought in no flowers!" she said, "and I made sure you had gone to fetch' em."

"Let me set down, Jill. That pain in my side, it do seem to bite orful hard this morning."

"Oh, poor mother! Set down and never mind the flowers. You shouldn't have gone out so early, you know you shouldn't. Here's a cup of coffee. Drink it, do."

The little kitchen was a picture of brightness and neatness; the small stove was polished like a looking-glass. Jill placed a coarse white cloth on the table, drew it up to her mother's side, placed the breakfast cups and saucers in order, laid bread and a

piece of salt butter on the board, and, sitting down herself, filled two large breakfast cups with coffee, which was really good and fragrant.

Mrs. Robinson drank off a cupful thirstily. She laid it down with a sigh of relief.

"You're a real good gel, Jill," she said. "And now I'll tell you what happened to me."

"Never mind, mother. You take your breakfast, and set quiet ; I'll go and fetch some flowers myself, as soon as we ha' done."

"You can't, child ; there ain't no money."

"No money ? But there was plenty in the drawer last night."

"Look for yourself, Jill."

Jill paused in her occupation of cutting thick bread and butter. The boys had already eaten their breakfasts, and gone away.

She gave a quick glance round the cosy little room. The sun shone in at the window. The influence of the pleasant summer day was reflected all over Jill's young face.

"There's time enough," she said, with a slow, satisfied smile. "You eat your breakfast, mother, and I'll fetch the flowers arter."

"But you can't, when there ain't no money. I tell yer somebody crep' in yere yesterday, most like when I wor—when I wor——"

"Never mind about that, mother. You had the pain bad, and you were drowsy, and you left the

door on the latch. That were how the thief got in, worn't it, mother?"

"Ef you like to have it so, child. Seems to me _____"

"Yes, I like to have it that way," repeated Jill. "You were drowsy, and some one come in and took the money out of the drawer. Give me yer cup, mother, and I'll fill it again."

Mrs. Robinson pushed her cup away from her, and stood up.

"Do you know what it is?" she said. "That there are times over and over again when I'd a sight rayther you struck me than took things as you do."

"But I couldn't take 'em any other way, mother, you know I couldn't. I—I love you too much."

Jill's lips trembled. There was a fierce passion in the way she said "I love you too much."

"And I put shame on you larst night, child. And now we are beggars. All our little savings is gone, and it's owing to me."

"No, we ain't beggars—I ha' a stocking put away in another drawer. It's for Nat and me 'gainst we set up housekeeping. I never spoke of it 'cause I 'arned every cent of it arter hours; but I'll take some to-day to stock our baskets, and then we'll be off to work."

Mrs. Robinson strode noisily across the floor. She took Jill's face between her two hands, and kissed

her on each blooming cheek. Then she sat down with a profound sigh of relief.

"Ain't you a good 'un?" she said. "Any mother 'ud be proud of yer. You hurry and buy the flowers, dawtie dear, and then we'll be off."

Breakfast was speedily finished, the breakfast things put away, and then Jill, drawing a ribbon from inside her dress, produced a small key. With this key she opened a small drawer, took some money out of an old stocking, locked the drawer again, slipped the key into its hiding-place, and went out.

After she was gone Poll sat very still. The bright colour which always flamed in her cheeks had somewhat faded; her big, dark eyes looked weary. After a time she gave utterance to a low moan.

"This pain's orful," she murmured. "I'd give the world for a nip of brandy. Coffee! What's coffee when you ache as I ache? A sip or two of hot gin, or brandy and water, 'ud make me feel fine. Jill's the best gel, but she don't know what it is to have the thirst on her like me."

Poll went into the little sleeping-room and flung herself across the bed. When Jill returned with the flowers she found her lying there, her face white and drawn, her eyes closed.

At the sound of the brisk step, Poll made a vigorous effort to sit up, but Jill's young glance could not be deceived.

"You shall not stir to sell a flower to-day," she

exclaimed. "You lie where you are, and take a good rest. I ha' got some beauties in the way of flowers, and I'll sell 'em all, and we'll have a jolly supper to-night. I met Nat when I were out, and he said he'd come in to supper. You stay where you are, mother, and I'll ask Mrs. Stanley to come and see arter you. I know she will, ef I ask her."

"The pain's werry bad this morning, Jill."

"Mrs. Stanley shall go and fetch a bottle of that soothing stuff from the chemist round the corner. That'll put you to sleep, and then you'll be a sight better. Now I must go."

Jill kissed her mother, took up her flower basket, stopped at the next landing to speak to Mrs. Stanley, and finally tripped downstairs with her basket of blooming flowers on her arm.

Outside the house she was met by a tall fair-haired young costermonger who took her basket from her, and turned to walk by her side.

"You shouldn't do it, Nat," she said. "It's a sin to be wasting your time, and the morning's late enough as it is."

"Late?" echoed the young giant with a gay laugh. "Why, it ain't nine yet, Jill, and anyhow I stole the time from my breakfast. I can just walk as far as your stand with you. And you'll give me a posy for my pains, won't you?"

"You choose it, Nat," said Jill.

"No, no, you must do that. Ain't you got a

rose under all 'em flaring poppies, and a bit o' mignonette? Them's my style. You make 'em up for me, Jill, in a posy, and I'll wear 'em in my button-hole all day, no matter who chaffs me."

Jill replied by a gay little laugh. The summer in the day got more and more into her face. She gave Nat many shy and lovely glances.

"Look yere," he said suddenly; "you ain't answered my question."

"What is it, lad?"

"When are we to be married, Jill? I'll ha' a holiday in three weeks, and I thought we might go before the registrar just then, and afterwards go away for a week into the country. What do you say?"

"Oh, I can't say nothing. There's mother, you know."

"But your mother won't keep us apart, Jill. That 'ud be cruel."

"No, but I can't leave her. You know that."

"Well, look yere; I don't want you to leave her. I'm doin' well wid my barrer, and you and me, we might take the flat alongside of Mrs. Stanley's, just under where you now live. Surely your mother and the boys could manage for one another, and you'd be always close to see to 'em, ef they was in any fix. The rooms is to be let, I know, and ef you say the word, Jill, I'll speak to the landlord this very night."

"But that flat costs a heap o' money; it don't seem right nohow," said Jill.

"Yes, it's as right as anything, darlin'. I'm 'arning good money now, it's all perfectly square. You leave it to me. You say yes, Jill; that's all you ha' got to do."

"I'll think it over, lad, and let you know to-night. Here we are at my stand now. Good-bye, Nat dear—oh, and here's your posy."

The young man took it with a smile.

"Pin it in for luck," he said. "Now I'm off. I'll be sure and come round this evening."

He blew a kiss to Jill, turned a corner, and disappeared.

Her stand was outside a large railway station. Six or seven other girls also sold flowers there, but not one of them could vie with Jill for picturesque arrangement.

She sat down now, and taking up her basket began hastily to divide her flowers into penny and twopenny bunches. This piece of work she generally did at home, but to-day she was late, and had to arrange her wares as quickly as she could while waiting for her customers.

The sun shone all over her as she worked. She made a gay bit of colour, and more than one person turned to look at her. Her black rippling hair was coiled round and round her shapely head. Her turban, too hot for this sultry day, was flung on the ground by her side. Her black dress fitted her slim figure to perfection, and her gay many-coloured apron

gave a bizarre effect to her costume, which exactly suited the somewhat foreign type of her face.



"It's Molly Maloney."

The flower girl who sat next her, in her untidiness, her dirt, and almost rags, acted as a foil to Jill. She had bedizened her person in a cheap dress of faded crimson,

Her hat, nearly a foot high, was perched on the back of her uncombed hair. It was trimmed with rusty crape and rendered gay with one or two ostrich feathers, and some bunches of artificial poppies.

This woman, between forty and fifty years of age, was, in her way, a favourite. She indulged in a brogue which declared her Irish origin, and whatever the weather, whatever the prospect of the flower-sellers, she always managed to keep the laugh and the ready jest going.

"Did you ask me what me name was, honey?" she would say to a customer attracted by the gleam of mischief in her eye. "Oh, then, glory be to heaven, it's Molly Maloney, at your service, and where would you find a better or a swater? Do take a bunch of flowers, lady, do now, and I'll pray for a good husband for you every time as I goes down on my bended knees."

Sallies of this sort provoked smiles even from the refined people who wished to buy flowers, and secured roars of laughter from the other flower girls, who delighted in egging Molly on to "give sauce," as they termed it, to the fine folks.

On this particular morning, however, Molly's pleasantries were not so frequent as usual. She whispered to Jill that little Kathleen, that jewel of a girl, was down with a cowl, and she was mighty bothered with her, and didn't know whether to send for the doctor or not.

"You might come and *see* her, Jill," said Molly Maloney. "Kathleen *she* worships the very ground you treads on, and *she's* down with a cowld or a faver, or something. I'll have no doctor to see her, no that I won't, for he'd be after ordhering her off to the hospital, and that 'ud kill her entirely. Oh, glory to heaven, what fine flowers you have this morning, Jill! I'm shamed to sit near you, that I am. Look at mine. They were under Kathie's bed all night, and they seem to smell of the faver. Oh, I'll get 'em off ef I sell 'em chape. You lend me a coil of wire, honey, and you'll see how I'll smarten 'em up."

Jill handed the wire to her neighbour with scarcely a remark. Her thoughts were far away with Nat, and the home they might soon have together. She wondered if they might really dare to take that flat next to Mrs. Stanley's—if by any possible means they could justify for themselves the extravagance of paying seven shillings a week for their rooms. Then how would her mother do without her? Who would help her mother when she got those queer attacks of pain, those unsupportable hours of agony which had hitherto found relief only in the one way?

Jill knew that it was very wrong of her mother to drink. The girl's own nature was so upright, so sweet, so high, that it was absolutely repulsive to her to see any one in the state in which she often now discovered her poor mother. The aim and object

of her life was to hide the disgrace of her mother's intemperate fits from the rest of the world ; she called them by any name but the true one. She was ready to cover them with any amount of lies if necessary ; she would have knocked down any one who accused her mother of getting drunk ; even Mrs. Robinson herself, in her repentant moments, did not dare to call a spade a spade—did not dare to speak of what she had done by its true name. Jill never blamed her, she put it all down to the pain and misery. It seemed to her there was no remedy left to her mother but to drown her sufferings in drink, and yet the fact cast a shadow over her own life, and caused her to sigh heavily, even though Nat was coming in the evening, and they could talk about their wedding day, which was so soon to arrive.

As she arranged her flowers with deft fingers this morning she made up her mind that she would say yes to Nat. She would be in the same house with her mother, and could still look after her. As to the boys, they were both of them doing for themselves. Jill scarcely gave them a thought at all in making her arrangements.

Yes, she would marry Nat, and trust to his never discovering that ugly secret about her mother.

She had just finished the arrangement of her basket, picturesquely heaping her masses of pink, white, and yellow poppies at one side, and her roses and forget-me-nots at another, when a tall girl,

dressed in the costume of the Flower Girls' Guild, came up with a basket of flowers on her arm and spoke to her.

She was a handsome girl, and looked striking in her neat grey dress and scarlet apron. Her hair was of a pale gold, her eyes large and blue; the expression of her somewhat pale face a little austere. Her basket was full of lovely fresh flowers, but although they were superior to Jill's in quality, they did not make nearly so fine a show.

"Is that you, Jill?" she called out. "Nat told me you were here. Why ain't your mother with you? Ain't she well?"

"No, she has a fit of that old pain over her," responded Jill. "I left her lying down. The pain takes a deal out of her, and I thought she had best be quiet."

"Don't she see no doctor? We has a splendid one belonging to the Guild; ef you and your mother would only join, you'd get a heap o' good out of it, Jill. But you're that obstinate, and when the best thing in the world is offered to you, you won't so much as open your eyes to see it. I wonder Nat holds on to you, that I do."

Jill smiled, reddened, and was about to reply, when the Irishwoman called out in her brilliant tones,

"What I say of Nat Carter is this, that he's the luckiest gossoon in all London to have got the

purtiest bit of a colleen to say she'll wed him. Why, you ain't got looks fit to hold a candle to her, Susy Carter, even though you are Nat's sister."

"Well, well," said Susan, in a slightly patronising manner, "we must each of us go our own gait. If Jill and her mother won't join the Guild, I can't force 'em. Maybe you'll do it later on, if Nat wishes it, Jill. And, oh, what do you think, here's a bit o' luck; I has just got that stand I was waiting for so long near the Marble Arch. The girl wot had it died yesterday, and I've stepped into her shoes, and a right good think I'll make of it. I must be off now, or I'll lose customers. Good-bye, Jill. Oh, by-the-way, you might as well mass these colours for me. I can't make my basket look like yourn, however hard I try."

Susy Carter put her basket on the ground as she spoke. Jill bent over it, re-arranged the flowers without a word, and returned it to her.

"Thank you—thank you," she cried delightedly. "Why, Jill, what fingers you has! Who but yourself would have thought of putting these pink peonies close to all them crimson poppies, and then throwing up the colour with this bunch of green. Oh, it's daring, but it's lovely; it'll fetch like anything. Now I'm off. You get your mother to see a doctor, Jill."

"No, I won't," said Jill, shortly, "I don't believe in 'em, neither does mother,"

"Right you are, honey," exclaimed Molly Maloney, "I don't hold by doethors, nayther. If my little Kathleen dies of the faver—bless her, the darlint!—why, I know as it's the will of the Almighty. But ef the doethor came and gave her his pizens—what is it, miss—what now?"

"Do you say you have a child down in fever?" said Susy Carter, speaking in a quick, passionate voice.

The Irishwoman was lounging with her back against the wall. She now started upright, and spoke defiantly.

"And why mayn't I have my darlint child down with the faver?" she demanded, her eyes darkening with anger.

"Did you keep those flowers in the room with the sick child all night?"

"Yes, my purty, I did. Would you like a bunch? you shall have it chape. A ha'p'ny for this rose; it'll look iligant pinned on the front of your dress. Now, then, only a ha'p'ny. Why, there ain't no chaper flowers in the whole of London."

"It's very wicked of you to sell those flowers," said Susy. "You may give the fever to a lot of other people by doing so. That's the good of belonging to our Guild. We have a beautiful cool room to keep our flowers in at night, so that no one can be poisoned by them. They keep fresh, and they last, and they don't carry horrid diseases about with

them. It's very wicked of you to sell those flowers. You ought to throw them away."

She picked up her basket as she spoke and marched off.

Molly sat down, muttering angry words under her breath.

"I wonder you takes up with the likes of her, Jill," she said, when she had cooled down sufficiently to address a few words to her companion.

Jill, who was in a day-dream, looked round with a start.

"Take up with whom?" she said.

"That consated bit of a colleen, Susy Carter. You're goin' to marry her brother. Seems to me you're throwing yourself away. Why, honey, you're illigant enough and handsome enough to be any man's chice."

"Yes, but I love Nat," interrupted Jill. "I'm not marrying Susy—I don't much care for Susy. Yes, ma'am? These bunches are twopence each, these a penny. I'll give you this bunch of poppies for sixpence, ma'am, and put some green with it."

A lady who had just come up from the Underground Railway had stopped, arrested by the beauty of Jill's flowers. She was holding a prettily dressed little girl of about six years old by the hand.

The child was all in white. She had cloudy golden hair falling over her shoulders, her round pink and white face resembled a daisy in its freshness.

The lady was in deep mourning ; the expression of her slightly worn face was sad.

"Shall I put the poppies up for you, ma'am?" repeated Jill.

"Yes. I will give you sixpence for that bunch, but be sure you let me have some green with it."

"I want to spend my penny on flowers, mother," said the child.

"Well, darling, choose. This nice flower-girl will give you a pretty posy for a penny."

"I want two posies," said the child. "One for Dick, and one for Dolly. It's Dick's birthday, but if I give him a posy, and don't give Dolly one, Dolly will cry."

The pretty child's little voice was full of anxious confidence. In making her statement she felt sure of sympathy, and she addressed not only her mother, but Jill and Molly Maloney.

Molly, who was squatting down on her knees, began to murmur an eager torrent of Irish blessings.

"Eh, glory! What a darlint it is!" she said. "For all the world like my little Kathleen! And so you want some flowers, my beauty? You let me sarve her, Jill. I has got rose-buds and mignonette all made up most enticing only a ha'p'ny a bunch."

"I want two bunches," repeated the child in her clear, precise voice, "one for Dick, because it's his birthday, and one for Dolly. Dolly's free years old,

and she'll cry if I don't take her a flower. I've only got *one* penny."

She opened the palm of her little hot hand, and showed Molly the coin.

"Now then, you shall choose, my pet," said the Irishwoman. "These bee-u-tiful flowers was growin' on the trees half-an-hour ago ; why the jew is scarcely dried on 'em yet. You choose, my pretty, you choose. Oh, the smell of 'em, why they'll nearly knock you down with the swateness. Thank you, lovey, thank you. May the Vargint bless you, me darlint, and that's the prayer of poor old Molly Maloney."

The child received the rather stale rose-buds and mignonette with silent rapture. Having received her prizes she scarcely gave another glance at Molly, but began chattering eagerly to her mother about the bliss which Dick and Dolly would feel when she presented the posies to them.

The lady having paid Jill for the flowers, took the child's hand and walked away. Molly gave a laugh of satisfaction as they did so.

"I told you so," she said, turning to Jill, "I said if I sold 'em chape I'd get rid of 'em, and they was under Kathleen's bed all night. I called 'em fresh to the child, bless her. She is a beauty, but—why, what's the matter, Jill ?"

"Nothing," said Jill, suddenly. "Look after my flowers, Molly, I'll be back in a jiffey."



"Here, little missy, . . . you give me them posies and take these."

With feverish haste she pulled some of her choicest button-holes out of a great heap in one corner of her basket, and leaving Molly open-mouthed with amazement, ran as fast as she could down the street after the lady and the child.

"Here, little missy," she said, panting out her words, for her breath had failed her, "you give me them posies and take these. These are a sight fresher and better. Here, missy, here!"

She pushed some lovely Gloire-de-Dijon, red geranium, and mignonette into the child's hand. The little one grasped them greedily, but held fast to her wired moss-rosebuds and forget-me-nots.

"I'll keep them all," she said. "Thank you, girl."

"No, no, make her give 'em up, ma'am," said Jill, turning to the lady. "I don't think they're wholesome. The woman's child is ill, and them flowers was in the room all night."

"Throw them away this moment, Ethel," said the mother in alarm. "What a kind girl you are! How can I thank you? No, Ethel, you must not cry. These are much more beautiful posies. Thank you, thank you. But how shameful that one should be exposed to such risks!"

But the lady spoke to empty air, for Jill, having seen the roses and forget-me-nots flung into the middle of the road, had instantly turned on her heel.

Molly was rather cross when she came back, but

as Jill gave no explanation whatever with regard to her sudden rush down the road, she soon relapsed into gloomy silence and into many anxious thoughts with regard to her little sick Kathleen.

The brilliant sunshiny morning did not fulfil its promise. In the afternoon the wind veered round, the sky became overcast, and between two and three o'clock a steady downpour of rain began.

Such weather is always fatal to the selling of flowers; at such times the ladies who are out in their fine summer dresses are little inclined to stop and make purchases. Gentlemen don't want buttonholes when they are wrapped up in mackintoshes; in short, the wet weather makes the pleasure-seeking public selfish.

Jill had been rather late arriving at her stand, and in consequence the gentlemen who almost always stopped to buy a buttonhole from the handsome young flower girl had carried their custom elsewhere.

With the exception of the lady who had bought a sixpenny bunch of poppies, Jill had only sold two or three pennyworth of flowers when the downpour of rain began. As to Molly, even her halfpenny buttonholes, quite an anomaly in the trade, could scarcely attract under such depressing circumstances.

The volatile creature began to rock herself backwards and forwards, and bewail her hard lot. What *should* she do, if she did not sell her flowers? There

was nothing at all in the house for little sick Kathleen.

"Not even money for the rint," she moaned, "and that cruel baste of a landlord would think nothing of turning us both into the street."

She poured her full tale of woe into Jill's ears, who listened and made small attempts to comfort her.

"Look yere," said Jill, suddenly, "I'll tell yer a sort of a fairy tale, if you'll listen."

"Oh, glory!" exclaimed Molly, "and I loves them stories. But it's moighty cowl'd I am. You spake on, honey, and I'll listen. It's comforting sometimes to picter things, but *I'd* rayther think of a right good dinner now than anything under the sun."

"This isn't a dinner," said Jill, "but it's lovely, and it's true."

"Fairy tales ain't true," interrupted Molly.

"Some are. This is—I see'd it with my own eyes last night. I went with the boys to Grosvenor Square, and I see'd the fine folks going into a ball. There was the madams in their satins, and laces, and feathers, and the men like princes every one of them. And the young gels in white as ef they were sort of angels. You could smell the flowers from the balconies right down in the street, and once I was pushed forrard, and I got a good sight right into the house. My word, Molly, it wor enough to dazzle yer! The soft look of it and the richness of it, and

the dazzle of the white marble walls! Oh, my word, what a story I could make up of a princess living in a palace like that. What's the matter, Molly."

"Whisht," said Molly, "howld your tongue. There's some corpses coming down the road. If there's one thing I love more than another it's a corpse, and there are three of them coming down in hearses. Three together—glory! There's a sight! 'Tis a damp day they has for their buryin', poor critters!"

Molly stood up in her excitement, pushing her despised basket of withered flowers behind her. The wind had blown her tall hat crooked, and had disarranged her unkempt grey hair, which surrounded her weather-beaten countenance now in grisly locks.

Putting her arms akimbo, she came out from under the shelter of the railway portico to see the funeral processions go by. Three hearses, one following the other—such a sight was worth a wet afternoon to behold. Molly, in her excitement, rushed back to where Jill was standing, and caught her roughly by the arm.

"Come on," she said. "They are the purtiest coffins I has seen for many a day. By the size of them they must howld full-grown men. Ah! what a wake the critters would have had in ould Ireland! Swate it would have been, and wouldn't the whiskey have flown around! Ah, worra me, it's a sorrowful day when they don't wake the dead. There they go!

there's the first—six foot high if he was an inch—a powerful big coffin he takes. Well, he'll find it damp getting under the earth on a day like this. My word, Jill! Look at the flowers! Why, they're heaped up on that coffin, and chice 'uns too—roses and lilies, and them big white daisies. Oh, shame, they'll all go underground, I expect. Here's the second! Can you see it, Jill? He's not so big, five foot seven or eight, I guess. Heaps of flowers, too. Simple waste, I call it, to give flowers to a corpse. It can nayther smell 'em, or look at 'em. Ah, and here's the last—poor faller, poor faller!”

The Irishwoman's ready tears sprang to her eyes. She turned and faced Jill.

“He ain't got one single flower on him!” she said. “Poor faller! Where's his wife, or his swate-heart? Poor faller, I do call it a negleckful shame of them.”

“But I thought you said——”

“Never mind what I said, I forgits it meself. There's the coffin, without a scrap of trimmin' on it, and the poor corpse inside a-frettin' and a-mourning. Oh, it's moighty disrespec'ful. Suppose it was your Nat, Jill?”

“No, it should never be my Nat,” said Jill, with a little cry.

Her quick, eager sympathies were aroused beyond endurance. The plain deal coffin, lying bare on the shabbiest of hearses, appealed to her innermost heart.

“ He shall have posies, too,” said the flower girl, with a cry.

She rushed back to the corner where her basket was placed out of reach of the rain, swung it up on her powerful young arm, and rushing out fearlessly into the street, flung the brilliant contents all over the deal coffin.

“ Let him have them to be buried with !” she said, addressing her words to a few of the passers-by, who could not help cheering her.





CHAPTER V.

SOON after this Jill went home. She carried an empty basket, and what was far more unusual, a pocket destitute of the smallest coin. The few pence she had earned during this unlucky day she had given to Molly, to help her to meet her rent and to buy some necessities for little sick Kathleen.

Jill went home, however, singing a low, glad song under her breath. Her temperament was very excitable, she had gone through times of great depression in her life, but she had also known her moments of ecstasy. Some of these blissful times were visiting her to-day. She did not mind the rain nor her empty pocket. She was glad she had poured the flowers over that plain deal coffin. It gave her delight to think that the pauper should go down to the grave as gaily decked for the burial as his richer brothers.

She stepped along quickly and lightly, singing short snatches of the street melodies of the day. The fact of having an empty pocket did not trouble her to-night. She had only to draw on her secret store. She had only to take a little, a very little, from the money put carefully out of sight in the old stocking, and all would be well.

It seemed only right and proper to Jill that to-day should be the day of gifts, that she should pour her flowers over a dead man, and should give the few pence she had earned to comfort a sick child.

These things were only as they should be, for to-night the crowning gift of all would take place, when she put her hand in Nat's and promised to wed him before the registrar in three weeks' time.

Jill reached home at last and ran lightly up the stairs to the top of the house. She was in a hurry, for she wanted to take some money out of the stocking to buy a suitable supper for Nat. If she could, too, she would purchase a bunch of cheap flowers to decorate the room.

In her excitement and strong interest, she, for the first time, gave her mother the second place in her thoughts. But as she reached the roughly-painted door which was shut against her, a sudden pang of fear went through her heart, and she paused for a moment before raising her hand to raise the knocker. Suppose her mother should be ill again, as she was

the night before! Suppose—a hot rush of colour spread all over Jill's dark face.

Nat knew nothing of these illnesses of her mother's. Nat had never seen Poll Robinson except gaily dressed, bright good-humour in her eyes, pleasant words on her lips, and a general look of comeliness radiating from her still-handsome person.

Nat had always looked at Jill's mother with admiration in his open blue eyes. Jill had loved him for these glances. Nothing had ever drawn him nearer to her than his liking for the comely, pleasant-spoken woman, who was so dear and beloved to the girl herself. Suppose he saw Poll as Poll was sometimes to be seen! Jill clenched her well-formed brown hand at the thought. She sounded a long knock at the door, and waited with a fast-beating heart for the result.

To the girl's relief a step was heard immediately within, and Poll, her face pale, her eyes heavy from long hours of suffering, opened the door.

"Oh, mother," said Jill, with a little laugh, "oh, mother dear."

She ran up to the woman and kissed her passionately, too relieved to find Poll in full possession of her senses to notice the white, drawn, aged expression of her face.

"Mother," said Jill, "here's an empty basket, and has nothing in my pocket, either."

"You look bright enough about it, Jill," said Poll.

No flowers and no money! What's the meaning of this ill-luck?"

"No, no, mother, you ain't to say the word ill-luck to-night. There ain't no such thing, not this night leastways. I'll tell you another time about the flowers and about having no money. Nat's coming, mother, Nat Carter, him as I'm keeping company with. And I'm—I'm going to say 'yea' to his 'yea' at last, mother. That's why there shouldn't be no ill-luck on a night like this."

Jill's sparkling eyes were raised almost shyly to her mother's. She was not a timid girl, but in acknowledging her love for the first time a sensation of shyness, new, strange, and sweet, crept over her.

She half expected her mother to fold her in a voluminous embrace, but Poll did nothing of the kind. She stood very upright, her back to the window, her massive figure flung out in strong relief against the background of evening light. But the pale, and even woe-begone expression of her face was lost in shadow.

"I must take some money out of the stocking to buy supper with," said Jill. "Susy may be coming as well as Nat, there's no saying; anyhow I'd like to have a good supper."

She walked across the room to the place where the bureau stood.

"Don't, Jill," said Poll suddenly. "I thought may be you'd be coming in hungry, and I has supper."

"You has got supper ready, mother?"

"Yes, child, yes. Don't stare at me as if you were going to eat me. I thought may be you'd be coming in hungry, and that the boys would want their fill, and that——"

"Mother, you didn't think as Nat were coming?"

"How was I to tell? When gels keep company with young men there's never no knowing when they'll make up their minds to wed 'em. Anyhow I bought some supper this morning, and here it be. You come and look, Jill."

Poll took her daughter's hand with almost unnecessary force, and opening a cupboard in the wall, showed a fresh loaf of bread, a pat of butter, some radishes, a good-sized pork pie, and a pound of uncooked sausages.

"There's a few potatoes in a bag there," said Poll. "We'll put 'em down to boil, and set the sausages on to fry. Ain't that a good enough supper even for Nat, Jill?"

"Oh, mother, it's a feast fit for a wedding," said Jill, laughing with pleasure. "And flowers, I do declare! Mother, there's no one like you. You forgets nothing."

"Don't praise me to-night, child, I can't quite abear it," said Poll. "Go and smarten yourself up for that young man of yourn, and let your old mother cook the supper."

Jill went into the other room, coiled her black hair

freshly round her head, took off her gaily-coloured apron, and put on in its place a white one trimmed with embroidery. In her hair she stuck a crimson rose, and came back to the kitchen looking demure and sweet.

Nat arrived in good time, accompanied by his sister, Susy. The boys came in after their day's work, and the whole party sat down to the excellent supper which Poll had prepared.

The meal was nearly drawing to a close when Susy, bending forward, said in her sharp voice to Jill—

“Nat tells me that you and he will most likely wed one another afore the next Bank Holiday.”

Jill coloured, glanced at Nat, who was watching her with all his heart in his eyes, and then nodded to Susy.

“And you and he mean to take the flat under this?”

Jill nodded again.

“It's early days for you to speak of these things with Jill, Susy,” said her brother. “We hasn't made up all our plans yet, Jill and me.”

“Oh yes, you has, Nat. And what I say is this, that seven shillings a week is a sight too much for you two to pay. It's beginning extravagant, and what's that but ending in ruin? Yes, I'm out-spoke,” continued Susy, raising her shrill, young voice, “and what I say is, ‘begin small and you'll end big!’ Ain't I right, Mrs. Robinson?”

"For sure, dearie," said Poll, in an absent voice. She was scarcely attending.

"Be you a-going to get married, Jill?" exclaimed Tom in an ecstasy. "Oh, jiminy! Won't we make the cakes and ale fly round on the day of the wedding! My stars, I'd like to go courting myself. Will you have me to go company with, miss?"

He pulled his forelock and gave Susy an impudent leer as he spoke. She did not take the least notice of him, but continued in a tone of solemn earnestness,

"You know, Jill, that you and Nat are goin' to take the rooms under this. And what I say is they're too dear and too many. What do you want with four rooms all to yourselves? You'll be both out all day, Nat with his donkey-cart, and you with your flowers."

"May be not," interrupted Nat. "May be I can 'arn enough for both of us."

"Oh, no, you can't, Nat; and Jill ain't the one to let you. You'll both be out all day, and you can't make no use of four rooms, let alone the furnishing on 'em. Now I ain't talking all this for nothing. You are both set on the rooms, and it ain't no use trying to turn obstinate folks from their own way. What I want to say is this, that I'm willing to take the best bedroom off you, ef you'll let me have it, and pay you 'arf-a-crown a week for it. And Jill can let me cook my food by her fire, and use her

oven when I want to. That will be a bargain as 'ull suit us both fine, and your rent 'ull be brought down to four-and-six. What do you say, Jill? I'm looking for fresh quarters, so I must have my answer soon."

Jill looked at Nat, who rose suddenly, went up to his sister, and laid one hand suddenly on her shoulder.

"Look you here, my gel," he said, "Jill and I can say nothing to-night. We'll give you your answer in a day or so. And now, Jill, if you'll put on your hat we'll go out a bit, and have a talk all by ourselves and fix up matters."

"It would be a right good thing for Jill to join the Guild," said Susy. "You ought to persuade her, Nat. She'd be a credit to you in the uniform, instead of going about the outlandish guy she is, in that flashy apron and turban."

"The prettiest bit of a wild flower in Lonnon for all that," murmured Nat under his breath. His honest eyes glowed with admiration. Jill smiled up at him.

She went into the other room to fetch her despised turban, which she tied under her chin, instead of coiling it as usual round her head.

"You'll wait till we come back, Susy," said her brother. She nodded acquiescence, and proceeded to give enlarged editions of her views on various matters to poor Poll. The boys lounged about for a little, then went out.

Susy helped Poll to wash up the supper things, and then she drew in her chair close to the little stove, glad, warm as the evening was, to toast her toes, and quite inclined to pour some more of her wisdom over Poll's devoted head.

Mrs. Robinson, however, had a knack of shutting up her ears when she did not care to listen. She sat now well forward on her seat, her big hands folded on her knee, her large black eyes gazing through Susy at something else—at a picture which filled her soul with sullen pain.

Susy expatiated on the delights of the Flower Girls' Guild, on the advantages of the neat uniform, on the money-profit which must surely arise by keeping flowers in the room provided by the Guild all night. Susy was intent on proselytising. If she could only get Mrs. Robinson and Jill to join the Guild she felt that her evening's work would not be in vain.

Poll sat mute as if she were taking in every word. Suddenly she spoke.

"What are you staying on for, Susy Carter?"

Susy, drawn up short, replied with almost hesitation—

"Nat told me to wait for him. But I can go," she added a little stiffly, "ef I'm in the way. I ain't one to stay loitering round in any room ef I'm not wanted."

"You ain't wanted here," said Poll. "It's weary

waiting for folks as has gone loving, and besides I must go out myself at once."

Susy got up and said good-bye. Poll took her hand, looked into her bright blue eyes and spoke—

"You has given me a power of advice this night, my gel."

"Yes; oh, if you would think it all over."

"I'm obleeged to yer, but I must own that I didn't catch on to many of yer words. I had a power of thinking to do on my own account. Still I'd like to pay yer back in yer own coin."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Robinson?"

"This is what I mean. Here's a bit of advice for you. Leave that young man yer brother and that young gel my daughter to themselves when they are wedded. Don't make nor meddle with them, or you'll be doing a mischief. Now good-night."

Susy went away, and Poll shut the door after her with a sort of vicious good-will.

"I can't abear her," she muttered. "Ef Nat were her sort he shouldn't have Jill."

Poll stood quiet for a moment, thinking hard. Then with a queer tremble about her full red lips she went into the little bedroom, took down a gaily coloured shawl from its peg, wrapped it about her person, and went out, putting the key of the little flat into her pocket.

"I can't abear it," she murmured, as she went down the stairs. "I has stood up agen it all day

long, and now, though it's the night when the child gives herself to another, though it's the night when my Jill—the best gel in Christendom—ought to be happy, and shall be happy, still, I must get something to dull the bitter pain. Jest twopenn'orth of gin 'ot, just twopenn'orth, and then I'll be better."

Poll found herself in the street. She began to walk quickly along the gaily lighted pavement. Her pain, bad and terrible as it was, did not interfere with her free, almost grand movement. She would soon reach the public-house, and twopennyworth of gin, the money for which she held in her hand, would bring a certain deadness of sensation which was the unhappy woman's only measure of relief. She walked on fast, her desire for the stimulant growing fiercer and fiercer, her wish to spare Jill's feelings on this night of all nights less and less.

A little mob of people blocked up the pavement. They were standing in front of a chemist's shop, and were looking eagerly into the shop through the brilliantly lighted windows.

"What is it?" said Poll, her attention arrested by the eager, excited looks of the crowd.

A woman came up and touched her on the arm.

"It's me, Poll," said Betsy Peters. "I has sold all the poppies. I had a power of luck with 'em. Yere's your shilling back agen, and may the good Lord above reward you."

"I don't want the shilling. Keep it, neighbour,"

said Poll. "Ef you had luck, it's more nor I had ; but you keep your luck, I don't want it off yer."

"There it is again," said Betsy Peters. "Worn't I prayin' for money to buy some of the medicine for little Jeanie ? And there, you has gone and give it to me."

"Wot medicine ?" asked Poll.

"Stuff they sells in yere. There's a sort of a doctor keeps this shop, and he has made pints of some powerful stuff, and he sells it off in bottles. It's warranted to cure colds and brownchitis and pains in the 'ead, and bad legs, and pains of all sorts whatever. Little Jeanie has turned that pettish after the brownchitis that I thought I'd get a bottle to brisk her up a bit. It's powerful 'ot, strong stuff, and they say, folks as tried it, that it seems to go straight to the vitals, and lifts you up so as you don't know yourself."

"And stops pain ? Do they say that ?" asked Poll.

"Sartin sure. It's a kind of an ease-all, that's the right name for it."

Poll looked into the palm of her hand, which contained the solitary twopence.

"How much do the stuff cost ?" she asked.

"You get a big bottle for sixpence. It's dirt cheap, dirt cheap."

"You're sure as it ain't pizen ?"

"Rayther. Didn't Mary Ann Jones in the court

take it, and Peter Samson, and a score more ? It's fine stuff, strengthening and good. What is it, neighbour ? You look white. Ain't you well ? ”

“ I has a bit of a pain, Betsy. A bit of a grip just under my left breast. Oh, it ain't nothing ; but I has a mind to try the medicine as dulls pain. It don't seem to take you off yer 'ead, like sperits, for instance ? ”

“ No, no. You get a bit drowsy, and that's about all.”

“ Well, I have a mind to try it. I'm sorry, neighbour, but I must ask you to give me fourpence back out of that shilling ; I'll pay yer back to-morrow in the market.”

“ Oh, neighbour, it's all yourn,” said poor Betsy.

“ No, it ain't, not a bit on it. Come into the shop with me, and we'll get a bottle each of the stuff.”

The two women pushed their way to the front, and soon entered the shop through the swinging glass doors. It was very hot inside, for the place was brilliantly lit with gas, and there was no proper ventilation. A mass of people were standing four deep round the counter, all waiting their turn to be supplied with the wonderful medicine.

The chemist, a pale man, with bright, wonderful keen eyes, was handing bottle after bottle of the comforting stuff across the counter. Many sixpences were passed across to him in return ; he dropped them into the open till by his side.

The sudden heat and closeness of the shop, after the outside air, proved too much for Poll. She was weak after her day of suffering, and it suddenly seemed to her that the shop reeled, that the gas came down and blinded her, that the floor rose up to smite her in the face. Her black eyes looked vaguely across the world of confusion in which she found herself, then all consciousness left her.





CHAPTER VI.



It seemed but a moment later that Poll opened her eyes, to find herself lying on a hard horse-hair sofa close to an open window. The chemist was bending over her, holding her wrist between his finger and thumb, and looking into her face with professional interest.

"Ah, that's nice," he said, "you are better now ; you'll do fine, if you'll just lie still for a minute or two. Take a sip of this water. It was the close air of the shop. You are much too ill to be going about in this fashion, you know."

Poll put her hand to her forehead, gave the chemist a dazed glance, saw Mrs. Peters standing in the background, and struggled to her feet.

"Stay still, you are not fit to move yet," repeated the chemist. "This woman—she is your friend, I suppose?—will look after you, while I go back to

attend to my customers. I'm going to shut up shop in a moment, and then I shall return to you. I want to speak to you before you go."

He left the little room, and Betsy Peters, who had been crying, came up to Poll.

"My poor dear," she said.

"I'm weak yet," said Poll. "I suppose I fainted. I never did that sort of thing before." Then she glanced down at the front of her dress, which was open and disarranged. "What did he do that for?" she asked in white anger.

"To let in the air. You was werry bad, Poll."

"Then he found out——"

"He found out, my poor dear."

"And you know it, Betsy Peters?"

"Oh, Poll, Poll, it's the will of the Lord."

"Don't come over me with your cant. I'm goin' out now. I'd like a drop of the medicine ef what you tells me about it is true, but I'll not wait. Good-night, neighbour; I must be goin' home to Jill."

"The chemist said as he'd speak to you, neighbour, and he seems a kind sort o' a man. You oughtn't to go away without seeing him."

"I don't want to see him; let me pass."

Poll approached the door of the little room. It was opened from behind, and the chemist came back.

"I am glad you are better," he said.

Poll dropped a curtsey.

"Yes, sir, and I'm obleeged to you. I'll be goin' home now."

"I should like to speak to you, first. Perhaps this woman would wait in the shop."

"No, she needn't do that," said Poll. "Jeanie will want you, Betsy. You'd best be goin' back to her. Good night."

Mrs. Peters turned away with the meek expression habitual to her. Poll and the chemist found themselves alone.

"Now, sir," she said, "I know you has found out what's up with me, but I don't want it talked over. Words won't mend it. Ef that stuff you sell is good for pain like mine I'll pay yer for a bottle o' it, and there's an end of the matter."

"The medicine I sell is good for a great many things, but it won't reach your pain. There is only one thing for you to do, my poor woman."

"Thank you, sir, I know that."

"Then you are going—"

"To the public-house round the corner? Yes, sir."

"Good heavens! how dreadful! The ease you get from drink only aggravates your suffering afterwards. It promotes fever, and undermines your strength."

"I'd give a deal this minute for three or four hours' ease," said Poll. "I'd drink a power of gin to get the ease, whether it were right or wrong."

"Look here," said the chemist. "I'll give you something to give you relief for the night. You can

take it away with you, and when you drink it you will sleep sound, and your pain will go. To-morrow you must go into a hospital ; you can be cured there—cured, I say.”

Poll laughed discordantly.

“I believe a deal o’ that sort of talk,” she said. “No, they cuts you up to bits in the ’ospital, that’s what they does.”

“You show your ignorance when you speak in that way. I tell you plainly that the only chance you have is to get into a hospital as fast as ever you can, and to stop drinking gin. If you go on as you are doing, at present you will not live many months, and your death will be accompanied by fearful suffering. Now do be sensible ; believe that doctors only mean your best good. Here, take this little bottle of medicine with you. It will give you a good night.”

Poll thanked the chemist and walked out of the shop. Should she go a little farther to the public-house just at the corner, whose brilliant lights she could see from where she stood ? No. For once she would be prudent ; she would obey the chemist’s directions, and trust to the medicine which she had put into her pocket giving her a night’s relief.

She quickly retraced her steps in the direction of her home. She was anxious to be back before Jill and young Carter returned.

She had just time to accomplish this purpose. Her bonnet and shawl were off, and a little paraffin

lamp was burning brightly in the neat sitting-room when the two young people came in.

Jill went straight up to her mother and kissed her ; then taking Nat's hand, she said, in a low, sweet voice which thrilled right into the heart of the older woman,

" We has it all settled, mother. He'll be my mate, and I'll be his. We're to be husband and wife in less than three weeks now, till death us do part ; that's what the Bible says, ain't it, Nat ? "

" I was wed in a church, long, long years ago," answered Poll, " and they said words o' that sort. You ain't going to take my gel afore the registrar, be you, Nat ? "

" I'll do as Jill pleases," replied Nat. " I ain't one for churches. I never did 'old by what you call religious folk. To be honest and upright and sober, that wor religion enough for me. To be sober and honest, and to speak the truth allers, that's my creed. But ef Jill wants the church and the parson, why she may have 'em ; I'm agreeable."

" I want the words, 'Till death us do part,'" said Jill. " Do they say them words at a Registry Office, Nat ? "

" Not as I know on, my gel."

" Well, mother looks as ef she'd drop. We can settle that matter another time. Perhaps you'd best be goin' home now, Nat. I see as Susy has left already."

"Yes," said Poll, "I sent her home. I said it wor weary work waiting for lovers. Well, good night, Nat Carter. You'll be good to Jill."

"I hope I will, Mrs. Robinson. Ef love can make me good to her, then she's safe enough."

"She's the sweetest gel man ever took to wife," continued Poll. "She's sound as a nut through and through, both mind and body. See you treat her well, or I'll give you my curse."

"Mother!" said Jill, in a voice of pain.

Poll pushed Jill aside with a fierce gesture.

"Let me be, gel," she said. "I must have my say out. Don't you suppose as it gives me pain to hand you over to another, even though it is Nat Carter, who I think well on? And I don't mind saying to his face that ef he treats you bad my curse'll foller him wherever he is. It ain't a light thing to have the curse of a mother on you, young man, so you'd best be careful."

Poll's words came out with such sudden force and venom that Jill turned pale, and going up to her lover, hid her face against his shoulder.

Nat was silent for a moment in his astonishment; then, throwing his strong arm round Jill, he said with a faint, sweet smile,

"And ef I treat her well, even half as well as she deserves, you'll bless me, won't you, Mrs. Robinson?"

"Ay, lad, that's true enough. I'll give you my blessing for what it's worth. I don't fear but you'll

be upright, Nat ; but yours is a hard creed, and may be it'll turn you a bit 'ard, by-and-bye."

"I don't know what you mean by my having a 'ard creed. A feller wouldn't be worth his salt what wasn't sober, honest, and truthful."

"Right you air, lad." Poll laughed bitterly. "Well, good night to you, and think on my words."

Jill accompanied Nat into the passage.

"Mother's werry tired," she said, "and she ain't as well as I'd like to see her. She suffers a good bit of pain now and then, and she feels me giving myself to you. You mustn't take agen her words, Nat."

"You may be sure I won't do that, sweetheart, seein' as she's your mother. But ef she's not well, Jill, oughtn't she to go to a 'orspital?"

"No, no, she'll never do that. Good night, Nat, good night."

"Be sure you keep that bit of money I give you to take care on safe, Jill. It's for my mate, Joe Williams, and I'll have to give it up to him on Saturday night. It's a load off my mind you having it, for I don't like the lodgings I'm in now a bit. I don't think the folks are straight, and five pounds is a goodish lump of money."

"I'll put it into the stocking with my own savings," said Jill. "Good night, Nat."



CHAPTER VII.

THE boys came in presently, and Jill and her mother went to bed. The young girl's head scarcely touched her pillow when she was in the land of dreams, but the older woman stayed awake.

She held tightly clasped in her hand the little bottle which the chemist had given her, and which was to give relief to her suffering. It was in her power to take the cork out of the bottle, and drink off the contents at any moment, but she refrained from doing so.

Cruel as her pain had been all day she did not want to drown it in oblivion now ; she wished to stay awake, she did not want the short hours of the summer night to slip away in forgetfulness.

Poll stretched out one hot hand, and laid it softly, with a mother's tenderness, on the shoulder of the girl who slept so peacefully at her side. It was

pleasant to touch that young form ; it was such ease to her tortured mind that it was almost as good as ease of body would have been.

Poll had always loved Jill with a curious, passionate, wayward affection. She had married a man whom she had not greatly cared for. He had been cruel to her in his time, and she had looked upon his death as a deliverance. She was the mother of three children, but two of them seemed to Poll to belong to her husband, and one to her. The boys were rough and commonplace ; they were just like their father ; Jill was beautiful both in mind and body, and Jill with her sweetness and love, her sympathy and tenderness, was Poll's very own. She was built on her model—the same features, the same dark eyes, the same thick coils of raven-black hair ; a trifle more of refinement in the girl than in the mother ; a shade or two of greater beauty ; added to this the glamour of early youth, but otherwise Jill was Poll over again.

Heart to heart these two had always understood each other ; heart to heart their love was returned. Now Jill was giving herself to another. It was all in the course of nature, and Poll would not have wished it otherwise.

Had things been different, had that ache in her breast never been, and in consequence had that craving for strong drink never seized her, she might have been happy with Jill's children on her knees,

Had everything been different she might have taken Nat into her heart, and loved him for her daughter's sake.

But as things were, Poll felt that she could never love Nat ; for although he little guessed it, he was the means of separating her from Jill.

Poll lay awake all night close to the girl ; she could not possibly waste the precious hours in sleep, because she meant to go away from her for ever in the morning. Poll felt that it would be utterly impossible for her to keep sober always, and it was part of Nat's creed that sobriety was godliness.

She had made up her mind what to do with the quick, fierce tenacity which was peculiar to her, when she heard the young man speak.

The chemist had told her only too plainly that she must go into a hospital or die. Poll preferred death to the hospital ; but Jill should not witness her dying tortures, and Jill's husband should never know that her mother had been one of those base, low women who get rid of their miseries in drink.

Jill did not want Poll any longer now, and because she loved her, the poor soul determined to go away and leave her.

"I'll drink the stuff in the little bottle to-morrow night," murmured Poll. "I'll want it then, but I like to lie wide-awake and close to the child to-night. When the light comes in I'll look well at all her features. I know 'em, of course—none better ; but

I'll take a good filling look at 'em when the light comes in."

She lay still herself, great pulses throbbing all over her body, the pain without becoming gradually less in intensity, by reason of the greater pain which surged and surged within.

There was one creature whom she loved with the fierce, hungry intensity of an untutored, a wild and yet in some ways a noble nature. The bond between her and her daughter was about to be severed. She herself, through her own deed, would cut the cord which bound them.

The light stole in at the window, at first faintly, then with more and more glad beams of sunshine and joy. Poll heard a neighbouring clock strike three. She said to herself,

"I'll lie and look at the child until the half-hour sounds, then I'll get up."

The minutes dragged themselves away, too slowly in one sense, too quickly in another. The solemn boom of the half-hour rang out into the sleeping morning. Poll rose very softly, and dressed herself.

"I must have some money," she murmured. "I'll take a sovereign or two out of Jill's stocking. She'd be glad to give it me, bless her ! and I'll write on a scrap of paper that I took it, and that I'm gone, and that she'll never be troubled by me no more. Oh, poor Jill, it 'ud be cruel to write like that, for I never did trouble her. With all my sins, I never

troubled my gel. We was knit too close, heart to heart, for either of us to trouble t'other."

Poll stooped down as she spoke, drew away the bed-clothes, and putting her hand lightly and softly against Jill's warm throat, revealed a narrow blue ribbon, to which a key was attached. Taking a pair of scissors out of her pocket, she cut the ribbon, and with the key in her hand went into the kitchen.

She opened the drawer of the bureau, and pulling out the old stocking, opened it, and spread the contents of a small gingham bag on the top of the dresser.

Jill, by care and management, had collected between four and five pounds. There were three sovereigns, a half-sovereign, some silver, and some coppers in the bag. Besides this there was a little parcel wrapped up carefully in tissue paper, and brown paper over it. Poll opened this, and saw that it contained five bright-looking sovereigns.

"I didn't know Jill was so rich," she murmured. "It's a good thing: she'll have somewhat to furnish her house with. Now, how little can I do with? A sovereign and ten shillings' worth of silver. That will be 'eaps. Oh, my gel, I wouldn't rob you of a penny ef I could help it, but you are the last to grudge it to me."

She returned the rest of the money to the old stocking, and shut the drawer. Then she considered what sort of note she should write to Jill. It must

be brief, for time was passing. It must also be brief because poor Poll was a very bad scribe.

She found a sheet of thin paper, and dipping a rusty pen into a penny bottle of ink, scribbled a few words.

"Dear Jill,—

"This is to say as I'll come back again when I'm cured. I'll ha' no pain when I come back, my gel, so you make yourself 'appy. I 'as took one pound in gold, and ten shillings in silver out of the old stocking.

"Your Mother.

"Tell Nat as I 'as my eye on 'im, and according as he deals with you, according will I think on him."

Poll left the letter open on the top of the bureau ; then she went back for a moment into the inner room.

Jill was lying fast asleep. Poll bent over her with a long, hungry gaze. She stooped her head, and lightly, very lightly, kissed the young girl on her forehead.

"Mother," murmured Jill in her sleep ; "oh, poor mother ! oh, poor mother !"

A look of pain came over her face ; she turned away with a profound and even careworn sigh.

"My gel !" responded Poll. "Oh, yes, it's best and right for me to go."

Instead of dressing herself in her usual picturesque fashion, with a coloured apron and gay turban, Poll put on a grey shawl, and a dowdy, old-fashioned

bonnet of rusty black lace. She tied up her other clothes in a big handkerchief, and without again glancing at her daughter left the room.

A moment later she was in the street. She had not troubled herself to give the boys a farewell look. In the intense pain of the other parting she had forgotten their very existence.

A few moments after she had left the house, the clock from the neighbouring church struck four. Jill often awoke at four o'clock, but this morning she slept on, quite oblivious of the passing of time.

Not so, however, one of the occupants of the press bed in the kitchen. This small person opened his ferrety blue eyes, wriggled his freckled face above the bed-clothes, and darted a quick, sly glance round the apartment.

"Oh, jiminy!" he murmured, "I 'ope as Bob won't wake till I 'as done it. Oh, my eyes and stars! what a chance is here."

He crept quietly out of bed, and with the light agile movements of a little cat went across the kitchen. He reached the bureau, and bending down pulled the drawer open, which contained Jill's hard-earned savings.

Tom was a little person who possessed neither conscience nor fear. He soon emptied the contents of the stocking into his eager little palm. The brown-paper parcel which contained Nat's five sovereigns was clutched in his other hand. He then

ran across the room, slipped the coins into his trousers pockets, put his trousers on and returned to the bureau.

His mother's letter, wide open and exposed to the view of all who cared to read, attracted his attention. Thanks to the board-school which he attended, Tom could both read and write. He soon acquainted himself with the contents of the letter, and murmuring "jiminy!" once again under his breath, went up to the bed where Bob still slept.

Tom stood on one leg, and contemplated Bob's sleeping face with its upturned nose, and its thick crop of freckles, for half a minute. Then taking up an old shoe, he flung it at the sleeper and awaited the result.

Bob started up with a howl.

"Hold your noise this minute," said Tom, falling upon Bob, and half throttling him. "Hold your noise, and I'll tell yer some'at. See here, Bob, I ha' got some swag, and ef you make a row Jill 'ull hear us."

The word "swag" had a magical effect on Bob. He stopped crying, wiped his dirty face, and looked at his brother with a world of wonder and desire lighting up each insignificant feature.

"Oh, my word, Tom!" he said, "is it gingerbread?"

"Gingerbread!" echoed Tom, in a voice of scorn. "You see yere. If you split I'll split you. Yere, ain't this prime?"

Tom thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and

pulling out his store of gold and silver, spread his treasures on the bed. Bob's eyes began to glitter, and his face turned white.

"Oh, Tom," he gasped, "you're a thief."

"I ain't," said Tom. "It's Jill's, and what's Jill's is mine. Ain't I her brother? Think on her saving it all up, and us being pinched and 'arf starved. Mean, I calls it, despert mean. Well, she can save some more. She ain't never goin' to see this swag agin."

Bob began slowly and cautiously to wriggle himself out of bed. He slipped on his trousers and his little jacket with trembling haste.

"Are we to be pals in it?" he said, looking at Tom. "Ef I don't split, are we to go pals?"

"I don't mind givin' yer some on it," said Tom. "But pals—that means 'arf and 'arf—no thank yer, young un."

Bob edged himself between Tom and the door of the room.

"Look yere," he said, "ef yer don't go arf, I'll screech out, and Jill 'ull come. I'm atween you and the door, and I'll screech orful loud, and Jill 'ull come afore you gits down-stairs, so now you knows. It's 'arf the swag with me, or its none."

Tom's eyes shot forth little rays of wrath, but he knew that Bob had a queer obstinate tenacity of his own, and he thought it best to humour him.

"All right," he said, "don't screech. We'll go pals. 'Spose as we runs away."

"I 'ates that book-shop," said Bob.

"And I'm run to death by the Boy Messenger Company," said Tom in a gloomy voice. "'Spouse we goes to sea, Bob."

"'Spouse we does," said Bob, with a little yelp. "'A life on the rolling wave'—oh, my stars, won't it be fine?"

"Mother has run away too," said Tom. "There's her letter on the top of the dresser. It was seeing her helping herself out of the stocking as put me up to it. She took some of the money, and she left the key in the drawer, that's how I come by this jolly find. You read her letter, Bob."

Bob did so, with his eyes glittering.

"I say," he exclaimed, "yere is a jolly go. I ha' got a stuff in my pocket, a kind of new sort of Indy-rubber wot rubs out writing. I say, Tom, let's put the whole of it on mother."

"The whole of wot? Wot do yer mean?"

"She says she has took thirty shillings. Let's rub out them words, and put as she took *all* that wor in the stocking. Then the perlice won't be a'ter us, and we can go off to sea without no one a-finding of us out."

Tom reflected over Bob's words of wisdom, and finally decided that his plan was worth adopting. While Jill still slept, the wicked, clever little fingers erased a portion of Poll's letter, and added the words instead, "I 'as took all the money you has hoarded away in the old stocking. I know you won't grudge it."

"Look yere," he said, "ef yer don't go 'arf, I'll screech out."





CHAPTER VIII.



ILL awoke presently, rubbed her eyes and sat up in bed. A sensation of gladness was all over her, but she could not at first understand what it meant. Her sleep had been so strong and dreamless that the remembrance of her engagement to Nat Carter did not in the first moment of waking return to her.

Then she remembered it. She gave a leap of pure joy and sprang lightly out of bed. Having dressed herself neatly she stood for a moment by the window of her little room. Thankfulness was filling her whole nature. She felt so young, so joyous, that it was a delight to her even to be alive. She looked up into the cloudless summer sky and said aloud :

"I don't know nothink 'bout the ways o' good folks, but they say that they b'lieve in Someone up there. They call Him God. Ef there is a God I

thank Him with my whole heart this morning. God up in the sky, ef you're there, do you hear me? Jill thanks yer with her whole heart to-day."

A faint dimness came over the girl's bright eyes ; she put up her hand to wipe it away, and then went into the kitchen.

Poll, of course, had gone to buy some flowers in the early market. She might be back at any moment.

Jill bustled about to prepare breakfast. She did not go near the dresser, which stood in one corner of the little room and was never used to hold cups and saucers or any implements of cookery. Jill's mind was so preoccupied that she did not even observe the boys' absence.

At last, however, the breakfast was ready. The coarse cups and saucers were placed on the little table, the coffee stood on the hob of the bright little stove. The bread and a plate of dripping were placed also on the table.

It was almost time for Poll to have returned. Jill expected each moment to hear her footstep in the passage. She sat down to wait for her, and at last remembering her brothers, turned to the press bedstead to tell them to get up. The bedstead was empty. The bed was tossed and tumbled ; no boys were to be seen there. Jill felt a passing wonder at their having gone away, without breakfast, but they were always erratic in their movements, and her

mind was too preoccupied with other thoughts for her to trouble herself long about them.

After waiting a moment or so longer she ate her own breakfast, for she reflected that if for any reason her mother was detained in the market she would have to go out to buy flowers to replenish her basket herself.

Having eaten, she went into her bedroom to put on her apron and turban, and now neatly dressed she came back into the kitchen, and taking up her flower-basket, was preparing to leave the room, when she suddenly remembered that her pockets were destitute of money. She had really earned nothing the day before ; she must therefore draw upon her little savings to replenish her basket this morning.

The thought gave her a faint passing annoyance, for she did not like to deduct even a penny from the money which would be so useful to Nat and herself when they started housekeeping.

There was no help for it, however, and she put her hand inside her dress to feel for the blue ribbon which held the precious little key of the bureau. The ribbon came out easily enough, but Jill started and felt herself turning pale when she saw that there was no key attached to it. Her eyes grew big with a sudden fear.

What had become of the key ? The ribbon looked as if it had been cut. Who could possibly have done this ? No one. The ribbon must have got thin and

worn without Jill knowing it. The key must have dropped off. Where had she lost it? How very unpleasant if she was forced to burst open the drawer of the bureau!

Then she remembered that she had the key last night when she opened the drawer to put the five sovereigns Nat had given her to take care of for his pal into the old stocking. She certainly had the key then—it must therefore be somewhere in the house.

She went back into her bedroom and searched on the floor and in the bed; she could not find it and returned to the kitchen with a puzzled, anxious expression on her face.

Then she gave a cry of delight and made a leap forward—the key was in the lock of the drawer. How careless of her to have left it there! and yet she was glad now, for no harm could possibly have happened, as no one but herself and her mother knew that she kept money in the drawer.

She went on her knees, pulled it open, and taking up the old stocking, unrolled it. Her own savings, amounting to nearly five pounds, were kept in a tiny gingham bag—the money Nat had given her was in a neat paper roll. The bag was there flat and empty—the roll had also disappeared.

Jill felt herself turning queer, sick and faint; she could not possibly believe that the money was gone; she felt certain at first that in some way these carefully hoarded savings must have slipped out of the

bag, that the roll of paper must be hiding in another part of the drawer.

It was a game of "Hide and Seek"—a cruel game between this money and a girl's troubled, anxious heart. She searched the drawer from end to end ; it contained some neatly-made aprons, some stockings, and a few other garments. The contents were quickly searched through, Jill rose to her feet—she was white and tottering, but she had not as yet reached the stage of believing that the money was gone.

She still thought that it was playing that hideous game of "Hide and Seek." She placed her hand against her heart and leant against the bureau. There was nothing for her but to go on seeking for the treasure so securely hidden ; but where now should she look ?

She stood still, trying her best to think. Suddenly her eyes rested on the open sheet of thin poor letter-paper which contained her mother's badly written words.

Jill started violently at the sight. She bent forward and tried to read the hand-writing. Her sight was excellent, but just for a moment she could not see the words in the letter ; then she read them :

"Dear Jill,—This is to say as I'll come back again when I'm cured."

"What did that mean"—Jill rubbed her eyes until they smarted—"Mother will come back again when she's cured" ? She read the next sentence :

"I'll ha' no pain when I come back, my gel, so you make yerself 'appy."

"Oh, poor mother, poor mother!" exclaimed Jill.

She looked again at the letter and read the last sentence :

"I 'as took all the money you has hoarded away in the old stocking. I know you won't grudge it."

Jill clasped her hands to her head ; it reeled ; she thought she should have fallen, but making a great effort, she tottered to a chair which stood near and sat down.

For several minutes she could not realise what had happened. Then the simple facts of the case came slowly home to her. The old stocking was empty. The money which Jill had taken nearly eighteen months to save—penny by penny and sixpence by sixpence—had vanished. But that was not the worst—that fact was bad, very bad, but it dwindled into insignificance beside the much more appalling fact that the five pounds which belonged to Nat's pal had also disappeared. Nat, her lover, had trusted her with this money—he had feared to keep it himself—he had believed it possible that some one might steal it, and he had given it to Jill for absolute security. She remembered, as she sat numbed and still on that chair, into which she had thrown herself, the look in Nat's eyes when he had spoken about giving her the money to keep safely for his pal.

The expression of trust, of confidence, of relief could not have been greater on Nat's open, honest face had he taken that money to the Bank of England. Jill represented the Bank of England for trustworthiness, for security, to Nat.

"He trusted me," she moaned; "he trusted me. Oh, mother, mother! what shall I do? Oh, mother, what have you done to the Jill whom you love?"

The poor girl felt that she could not keep still any longer.

By what possible means was she to get the money back? She must recover it—she must rescue it before her mother had spent it all. She rose and went hurriedly out. Her head was in a whirl, her usual clear judgment had, for the time, forsaken her. She, the upright, the respectable Jill, was penniless; but that was not the worst—she felt herself, in a measure, a thief, for through her Nat's money had vanished.

Going down-stairs she met old Mrs. Stanley, who stopped her to utter a pleasant "Good morning."

"What is it, Jill?" said the old woman, startled by the queer, strange look on the girl's face. "What's the matter, dearie? You don't look yourself."

"I'm a bit anxious," said Jill. "Mother's not quite well, and I—I'm going out. Ef any one calls and arsk's arter me, you say as I'll may be—be out all day, Mrs. Stanley."

"Yes, my love, I'll say." The old woman looked

at her longingly ; words came to her lips which she felt a strange desire to utter. While she hesitated, however, Jill had run quickly down-stairs, and was lost to view.

Her empty basket hung on her arm. As she walked through the streets in the early summer morning a neighbouring clock struck six. She was still in very good time to get a supply of flowers for her basket. This was the height of the flower season. Flowers of all sorts were abundant and cheap. Jill was a regular customer too, and she knew more than one flower merchant who would give her a good selection of flowers even if she were a little late in going to buy them.

She passed through the ugly neighbourhood of Drury Lane, and taking a short cut for the Strand, found herself in Bedford Street.

She was close now to the market, and here she paused to consider what she should really do.

She had no money in her pocket, but this fact did not greatly trouble her, for she could easily go on tick for some flowers until the following morning. There was more than one flower merchant who would gladly fill the pretty girl's basket for the sake of a smile, a shy "thank you," and a look of gratitude in those lovely dark eyes. The fact that she was absolutely penniless was not, therefore, Jill's trouble.

No! she had something far more important to think over.

Should she waste time at all to-day trying to sell flowers? Would it not be better for her to spend the long hours of this summer day looking for her mother? If she found her mother she could easily induce her to give back Nat's five sovereigns. As for her own savings, they were of small consequence.

When she was about half-way up Bedford Street, Jill stood still to carefully consider her plans.

A heavy blow had been dealt at her, dealt at her, too, when the radiant sun of happiness was shining through all her being. She had been stunned for a little, but now her vigorous young brain was capable once more of taking in the whole situation.

She decided after a very brief pause that she would go to the market and buy enough flowers to stock her basket with; she would then go to her usual stand outside the Metropolitan Railway Station and sell the flowers as quickly as possible. Thus she would provide herself with a little ready money. She could pay back her debt for the flowers with part of this money, and spend the rest of it in looking for her mother.

To-day was Friday, and Nat had told her that he was scarcely likely to see her again before Saturday evening. She had, therefore, this much breathing time, either to recover the money, or to make up her mind what to say to Nat.

When this definite plan of action made itself plain to her, her brow cleared and she quickened her steps

to reach the market. She soon found herself under the great glass dome where the flowers were sold, and in a moment was standing by a stall waiting for her turn to be served.

The extreme bustle and movement of the market was almost at its height when she arrived. An eager hum of busy voices pervaded the place. The merchants were busy, not only selling their flowers, but eating excellent breakfasts of coffee, poached eggs, bacon, and other delicacies, which were supplied to them by waiters from neighbouring restaurants.

The strong perfume of the flowers, and the heat, which, early as it was, was beginning to be felt through the glass roof, would have made the place almost intolerable to any one less acclimatised to this sort of thing than Jill.

Some of the flower girls looked already spent and tired. They were, for the most part, an unkempt-looking lot, their hair untidy, their dress exhibiting the extreme of dowdiness ; the shabbiest hats adorned their rough heads ; old shawls, greasy with wear, and dull from long exposure to weather, protected their ample shoulders. Their dresses were almost ragged, their feet slipshod and untidy.

Youth was a misnomer for most of them, and beauty was not to be found in their ranks. They knew good flowers, however, and chaffered eagerly, and conducted their marketing on the most approved business principles.

Jill was such a contrast to the other flower girls—her beauty was so remarkable, her dress so picturesque as she stood under one of the big palm-trees, that she resembled a tropical flower herself. She was looked at with envy by one or two of the girls, and with marked admiration by several young costermongers, who would have given a good deal for a nod or smile from so lovely a girl.

As a rule she had a pleasant, friendly way with her, never allowing familiarities, but taking good-natured badinage and jest in the spirit in which they were meant.

To-day, however, she saw none of the faces, heard none of the comments, returned none of the murmured greetings.

She waited for her turn to be served, as motionless almost as a statue, and it was not until a rather rough voice sounded in her ears that she awoke to the full difficulties of her present position.

"Can I sarve you, miss?" said a flower merchant. "I 'as got some beautiful rose-buds this morning, and a great supply of water-lilies. You come and see 'em, they're just your style."

This flower merchant's name was Silas Lynn. He was a heavy-built man, with a powerful face, a rough shock of hair, and small, deeply set eyes. His mouth was coarse, his hands and feet enormous. He owned a cottage and a couple of acres of ground in Kent, and brought his flowers and fruit daily to the market,

transacting all his business himself, and allowing no middleman to interfere with him.

Silas had a voice which exactly matched his appearance. It was so rough and harsh that it absolutely militated against his business ; the more timid of the flower girls preferring to carry their pence and shillings to quarters where they would be sure of civil treatment.

One or two people who knew him very well indeed, made the queer remark, however, that Silas when bending over his favourite flowers had been heard to speak softly ; that when he lifted the young leaves, and looked into the lovely blossoms, a mild sort of tender sunshine would suffuse his rough face.

These reports of him had been whispered by a few, but they were not generally believed. He was strictly honest, sober, industrious, but hard as a nail ; a man who looked for no quarter, and gave none.

This he fully believed to be his own character, and his neighbours and friends supported him in the belief. It was from this man, however, that Jill had resolved to ask a favour.

When he desired her to come and look at his lilies, she went quietly with him to a back part of his stall, where the great, white waxy lilies were lying in a tank which he had provided for the purpose.

"I has had a good morning's work," said Silas, rubbing his hands, and turning aside for a moment to swallow down a great cupful of scalding coffee.

"Ah, there ain't nothing like doing your business yourself, and trusting your affairs to no one else. That's my way. I larnt it from my mother. Wot's the matter, lass? You look peaky."

"I'm a bit tired," said Jill.

"And a bit late, too, I guess. Get out of this, this moment, you varmint, or I'll break every bone in your body!" These last words were thundered at a small ragamuffin of ten, who had been loafing round, but now took to his heels as if pursued by demons. "You're a bit late," continued Silas, allowing his small eyes to rest upon Jill, with the sort of pleased satisfaction with which he regarded what he was fond of calling a "thorough-bred rose-bud." I don't see you nor that mother of yours often round as late as this; but now, how can I sarve ye?"

"Oh, Mr. Silas Lynn," exclaimed Jill, clasping her hands, and speaking in swift entreaty, "ef you *would* give me just a few flowers to put in my basket, and let me pay for 'em to-morrow morning."

Lynn indulged in a loud laugh of astonishment, perplexity, and pleasure. He was as hard as a nail to be sure, but he did not object to lending Jill some flowers.

"I'll lend 'em with pleasure," he said; "but you s'prise me, Jill Robinson; I thought as you had a tidy lot of money put away."

"So I had," answered Jill, her lips beginning to quiver; "I had yesterday, but not this morning."

When I looked for the money this morning it wor gone."

"*Stolen*, does yer mean?"

"No, no; nothing o' the sort—I can't speak o' it. Will yer lend me a few flowers, and let me go?"

"Gimme yer basket."

Silas pulled it roughly out of the girl's hand. He laid some wet grass in one corner, and arranged a pile of lilies on it; rose-buds, white, pink, cream-coloured followed; geraniums in every shade made up a brillant bank in another corner. Masses of poppies filled the remaining space.

Silas had a knack of arranging flowers which could only be excelled by Jill herself. His great hands could touch the tiniest blossoms with a rare taste and a skill which produced surprising results.

"There!" he said suddenly. "I forgot the carnations! We'll pop in a bunch here; they are wonderful for sweetness; they mind me o' my mother. She had all their little ways. I'd like to tell you about her some day. Yere's the baskit, and good luck to you! You're a tidy lass—the only tidy one as comes to the market, and it's a pleasure to see yer with the bits of flowers."

"But," said Jill, colouring and trembling, for sore as her heart was it could not help going out to such a basket of beauty, "I didn't mean to have flowers like *these*. Why, there's a sight more nor a guinea's worth yere; and I only meant to have two or three

shillings' worth o' the commoner sorts—poppies, and sich-like. I can make up field poppies and grasses to look wonderful, and I could sell 'em off quick, for the ladies like 'em for those new sort of heart drorin'-rooms as is all the go."

"Heart drorin'-rooms?" queried Silas. "My word, what are they?"

"I don't know, but they are all the rage. Heart drorin'-rooms and heart dresses. You hears of 'em iverywhere."

"Well, there's a heart basket," said Silas, with a harsh laugh, which was partly caused by a sudden embarrassment which came over him. "You take it, and go."

"But I can't, really. I could never pay it back."

"You're not meant to—it's a gift."

"A gift, Mr. Lynn?"

Jill raised her eyes, looked him full in the face, read a meaning in his awkward glance, and pushed the basket of lovely flowers away.

"I can't take it," she said, "not as a gift; no, that worn't my thought. Thank yer all the same." She began, with hands that shook, to replace the masses of flowers on the flower merchant's stall.

In a moment she found her two hands imprisoned.

"Don't do it," said Silas, in a voice of low thunder. "Ef you touch 'em I'll fling 'em on the refuse heap out there. Pay me, ef you will, but take the basket and go. And listen first: Jill Robinson! What do

you think them flowers are worth to me? I'd give every flower on this stall for one kiss from your red lips. So now you know the mind of Silas Lynn. I've a rough voice, and a rough look, but my *heart's* leal. Now you know my mind, so you can go, lass."

The man almost pushed her away, and the next moment his stentorian voice was heard, shouting savagely at some timid customers who had appeared on the scene.





CHAPTER IX.



JILL had a very successful morning with her flowers; they were the envy and admiration of all the other flower women. Even Molly Maloney felt as if she must indulge in a fit of crossness when she saw those water-lilies, carnations and rose-buds. But there was something in Jill's face which soon made the other women cease to feel unkindly towards her. Trouble was new to Jill, and the frightened, half-pathetic, half-despairing expression of her full, velvety brown eyes gave the flower girls, who came to talk to her and to admire her basket a queer sensation. They were curious, but their curiosity was not likely to be gratified by Jill. Even to Molly Maloney she scarcely vouchsafed a word of explanation.

"I'm in a bit of worry about mother," she said once, in a low whisper. "Don't speak on it, Molly ;

it'll pass, no doubt. You ain't seen mother this morning, ha' you? She han't chanced to call round to ask arter Kathleen?"

"No," replied Molly; "and, ef she did, I wouldn't dare to let her in. Kathleen's down with faver, and no mistake. I'm at my best to keep it from the neighbours, for, ef they knew, one o' them 'spectors would come round and carry the por chile off to the hospital. Oh! worra me, worra me! it's a weary world, and no mistake."

Jill said some words of sympathy. She was fond of pretty little Irish Kathleen, and, taking a choice rose-bud and carnation out of her basket, she gave them to Molly to take home to the child.

"Tell her they're from Jill," she said, "and I'll look round to-morrow, may be, or may be Sunday."

"You ain't 'feared o' the faver, then, honey?"

"No. Why should I be? It isn't sickness as frights me."

"You have a throuble, then, honey?"

"I'm fretted about mother, Mrs. Maloney. She ain't well, and it frets me. She's more than anybody to me, mother is. I've sold most of my flowers now, so I'll go. Good afternoon to yer, Molly."

Jill took up her basket and walked away. She spent all the rest of the day going from one low haunt to another, looking in vain for Mrs. Robinson. It did not occur to her to seek for her mother at Betsy Peters's, but, on her way back to their own

little flat, she ran up against Betsy, who stopped her at once to ask about Poll.

"She wor werry bad last night," explained Betsy, and then she told of the incident which had occurred at the chemist's shop.

"I thought I'd call round and ask arter her to-day," said Betsy. "Her looks frightened me, and she's real bad—real bad, Jill Robinson. The chemist knows, and so do I, what ails her."

"It's more nor I do," said Jill, drawing herself up. For a brief instant she feared that Mrs. Peters was referring to Poll's unfortunate habit of taking more than was good for her. Jill's black eyes flashed, and poor, meek, pale-faced Betsy started back a step in alarm.

"I don't mean nothink bad, dearie," she said. "It's the heavy hand of the Lord that's laid on your mother. She ought to go to a hospital. I don't hold by 'em in most cases, but your mother ought to go."

Jill felt herself turning very pale. "What do yer mean?" she said.

The woman stepped forward and whispered a word in her ear. The ugly sound caused her to reel for a moment, a faint dizziness came over her; she clutched Mrs. Peters by the shoulder to keep herself from falling.

"Don't take on, lovey," said the woman. "It's the will o' the Lord. There's no goin' agen' Him, Jill."

'His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour :
The bud will have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.' "

"Don't talk cant," said Jill. "Mother's bad, ef what you say is true. She has got something orful the matter, and you tell me it's the will of God, and you folks wot b'lieve in God talk o' Him as good and kind. Ef God is good and kind, then it ain't His will as mother should suffer orful things sech as you tell on. I b'lieve there's a devil somewhere, and *he* does the bad things. It ain't God. I'd scorn to think it o' any one so beautiful as He."

The girl's indignant words rang out on the evening air. Mrs. Peters thought them blasphemy, and clasped her thin hands in horror. Jill turned to leave her. She went back to the empty flat, and sat down in the old arm-chair where her mother had so often tried to rest.

It seemed to Jill that at last she had got at the meaning of her mother's sudden departure. Poll had gone away because Jill must not see her pains. Jill must not see them—Jill, who loved her with that passion which comes now and then to a daughter for a mother, which now and then is almost the strongest passion of life !

In that moment of agony Jill thought far more of her mother than she did of Nat. She loved Nat intensely, but just then the aching emptiness within her was caused entirely by Poll's absence.

She had never been angry with her mother for taking, as she supposed, all the savings out of the old stocking. Her one desire now was to shelter her mother. Jill had always stood between Poll and the censorious world. Jill had always understood why Poll must drink now and then ; now it seemed to her that she also understood why the savings must go.

"I must find mother again," she said to herself, after a pause. "I must, and I will ; but, first of all, I ha' got to give Nat back the five sovereigns as he gave me to take care on for his pal. There can be no marrying a'tween us until mother's found, and the money given back to Nat."

Jill spread her day's earnings on her lap. She found that she had fifteen shillings, and had still a sufficient number of unsold flowers in her basket to give her, with a very few additions, sufficient material for to-morrow's work. She had spent the greater part of an hour in the empty kitchen when there came a brisk knock at the door. She started at the sound, and went with some slight hesitation to open it. Nat might possibly be waiting outside. She longed to throw herself into his arms, and yet she dreaded seeing him. The knock was repeated. She opened the door, to see Susy Carter standing outside.

"It's me," she said, in her brisk way. "May I come in ? My word, ain't it hot !"

She entered the kitchen at once, and, taking a

handkerchief out of her pocket, wiped her heated face.

"I thought maybe you'd be having tea," she said. "I'd be glad of a cup. Ain't your mother in yet?"

"No, Susy." Jill filled the kettle as she spoke, and, turning on the gas, set it on the little stove to boil. "You shall have a cup of tea as soon as ever I can get it ready, Susy."

"You don't look spry," said Susy. "Wot's up with yer? Has you and Nat had a quarrel?"

"No. How dare you say it?" Jill's eyes flashed with anger.

"Oh, highty-tighty! What a fly-away young madam it is!" said Susy, with her shrill laugh. "Well, Jill, I meant no offence. You look downhearted, somehow; and, of course, a gel don't expect to see that on the face of another gel wot's jest gone and engaged herself to her brother. It's but natrel to see smiles on yer face, Jill, and to hear you joking and laughing. I joke orful when I'm happy, there's nothing like a good joke for making time pass."

"Well, I'm happy enough," said Jill. "Who said I wasn't? It ain't my way to take my happiness all sparklin' and fizzin'. I likes it quiet best."

"You're in great luck to have got Nat," continued Susy. "Ef I was another sort, I'd be in a rage of jealousy, but that ain't me. Nat's safe to rise, and get on in the costering line; and he has saved a good

little bit of money, too, and put it away in the Savings' Bank, ef I am not much mistook. Nat's close, when he likes, and so I tell him. I like him all the better for it. I 'ates people as wears their hearts on their sleeve, and tell all about their money matters, and so forth. I'm close myself, and inclined to be saving, and so will Nat be ef you'll let him, Jill."

"Who says I won't let him?" retorted Jill. She spoke almost pettishly; her voice had completely lost its usual sweetness. Susy was never a congenial companion to Jill, and to-night she rubbed her the wrong way with each word she uttered.

"I'm not saying nothing," replied Susy, nodding her pretty, fair head. "But deeds speak a sight louder nor words, and wot I want to know is this—why you and Nat has made up yer mind to take all them heaps of rooms downstairs? It's the height of folly, and that you know, Jill."

"No, I don't; but I know something else," replied Jill.

"Wot? My word! you'll spill that boiling water on the tablecloth ef you don't look out. Wot do you know, Jill?"

"That Nat and me can manage our own affairs, ef we are let," answered Jill.

"Oh, dearie me! now you're turning sulky. I must let Nat know as the pretty little dear has got a temper of her own. But, speakin' serious, Jill,

hadn't we better strike that bargain while we are about it?"

"Wot bargain?"

"Me to have the best bedroom, and the run of the kitchen, for 'arf-a-crown a week. Come now, it's only common prudence to say yes."

Jill sat down wearily, and dropped her hands to her sides. She had supplied Susy with tea, and bread and butter, and a substantial slice of cold pork-pie, but she could not touch any food herself.

"Nat must decide," she said. "It's Nat's affair, it ain't mine. It's for him to decide."

"He says t'other way," said Susy, with a pout. "I bothered him this morning for a good while, and he said it was for you to say. Fact is, Jill, you can turn Nat round your little finger. He'll do nothing agen you, ef it was ever so little."

"Well, well, I'll let you know presently," said Jill. "I has a headache to-night, and I am tired."

"But it won't tire you any worse jest to say yes. I'm in a choky, nasty room now, and I want to give notice to quit. Ef you say 'Yes' to-night, I can give a week's notice on Monday, and then I can move in yere Monday week. Nat'll keep my bits of things in his room, and you'd give me a shake-down till you was married, wouldn't you, Jill? Say yes, now do, dearie."

"I can't say nothing for certain, Susy. Nat and

me we ain't married yet. Ef we marry, I suppose you're welcome to the room. I can't say no more."

"And you 'as said 'eaps, and I'm much obleeged," said Susy, springing from her chair, running up to Jill and giving her a hearty embrace. "I'll jest snap my fingers in my landlady's face, come Monday. You're a good sort, Jill, and a real out-and-out beauty. I don't wonder Nat's took with you. Now, I suppose, I had better go. Poor Nat! he were in a bit of trouble this morning for all he's in such delight at your promising to wed him."

"Nat in trouble!" said Jill, starting up, and speaking in a voice all animation and pain. "Wot do you mean, Susy? and why didn't you tell me that afore?"

"I forgot it. My sakes, what a jumpy sort of wife you'll make! I doubt if you and Nat will suit. He's accustomed to me all his days and I never let my feelings get the upper hand in that style."

"But wot is he in trouble about, Susy?"

"Oh, it's that pal o' his, Joe Williams."

"Yes. Wot o' he?" said Jill. She felt her heart beating quickly, for it was Williams's money which Nat had placed in her keeping.

"He's dead," said Susy. "He died sudden this morning. Nat's orful cut up, for the poor lad has left a wife and two or three children. By the way, Nat says that he has given you some money of Joe's to keep safe for him."

"So he has," replied Jill.

"You look orful white, Jill. Are you going to faint?"

"I han't the least notion of sech a thing."

"Well, you do look queer! You're all narves, I expect. I wish Nat luck on you, with yer starty ways, and yer changes of colour."

"I'm very sorry about Williams," said Jill, her eyes filling with tears. "I expect it has took Nat all on a heap. He set a deal of store on Williams."

"He did. But, my sakes, you never knew him, Jill; it ain't for you to be fretting. It's a good thing you has got the money safe, for 'twill be wanted now for the funeral. Nat said as 'twere a load on his mind a-keeping of it, for our rooms ain't safe. We was very onlucky in 'em, and I daren't leave so much as a shilling behind me in the morning. I wish our Guild would provide rooms for us to sleep in, as well as a place for the flowers. Well, I must go now, Jill. I'm obleeged for the tea, and the promise of the rooms—the *best* bedroom, mind, when you and Nat is wed. How late yer mother is comin' ome. Good-night, Jill."

Susy took herself off at last, and Jill breathed a sigh of relief. She sat up for some little time longer, waiting for her brothers; but presently, finding they did not come home, locked the door of the little flat and went to bed. She slept scarcely at all that night, and awoke in the morning quite determined

with regard to one thing—that she must either find her mother before the evening, or get the five pounds from some one else to return to Nat Carter.

As she was dressing she thought, for the first time almost since she had left him, of Silas Lynn. She remembered his generosity with regard to the flowers. That basket of flowers was really a splendid gift, and, although Jill meant to give him back at least ten shillings this morning, she could not but own that he had been more than kind to her. As to his outspoken words of admiration, she gave them very small consideration. She was accustomed to broad compliments from men of all sorts, and mere words made little or no impression on her. She thought now, however, with a certain little warm comforting thrill of hope, that perhaps Silas would be induced to lend her the princely sum of five pounds, to be paid back day by day in small instalments, until the whole debt was discharged.

Silas had been kind to Jill for a long time now, and several of the flower girls had joked her about the great, coarse, ugly-looking fellow. If she could induce Silas to help her in her present awful dilemma, she felt no service would be too great for her to render him. If Silas lent her five pounds, she might conceal the knowledge of what her mother had done from Nat, and they might be married some day, if not at once.

Jill hastened her toilet when this thought came to

comfort her. She snatched up a piece of dry bread to eat, instead of breakfast, and, munching it as she went, hurried down-stairs. She reached the market quite an hour earlier than she had done on the previous day, and was rewarded at once by a broad stare from Silas. His stare was presently illuminated by a smile, which ended in a wink, and, stretching out one big hand, he beckoned to Jill to approach.

"I'm going to order breakfast for two," he said, "and there's a cosy seat here, under this rose-tree. I'll fill yer basket, my gel, so you needn't go no further. You set there, and take the world' easy. My word! you mind me o' my mother more nor ever this mornin'. There's a waiter over there, I'll call him. Hi, Sam! You come here this minute. Now then, I want a rare feed for me and this young 'ooman. Wot have you got?"

"Kidneys, rashers and heggs, sorsiges, homlettes," called the waiter off on his fingers.

"Wot's yer mind?" asked Silas, turning to Jill. "Have a hegg done to a turn, and a little juicy slice of curled-up bacon on the top o' it? And see yere, waiter, I'll have a chump chop, and two heggs, and make the coffee strong, wotever you do. Now be quick, there's a good chap."

The waiter nodded, grinned, and disappeared.

When Silas had given orders about his breakfast, he turned and looked at Jill with that slow, grave

smile, which, nevertheless, was sweet enough to transform his rough face.

"I'm puzzled to know what flower to liken yer to," he said. "Seems to me maybe as you most takes arter one o' they dainty toolips afore they comes out into full bloom. Of all flowers under the sun, there seems to me to be more in a toolip than in any other. For one thing, it comes arter the dead, cold winter; then it's so prim and yet so gay—so proper all round, and yet there's sech a frolicsome look 'bout the little tips o' the flowers jest where they half opens to let in the sunlight and the sunshine. Yes, you mind me o' one o' them dark red, rich-looking toolip-buds as comes in the spring."

Jill scarcely replied to these words from Silas. She was thinking of the request she was about to make him, and wondering in what language she could best make known her sore want. She sat very still under the large rose-tree where he had placed her, her rich, dark head was slightly bent forward, her brown, yet shapely hands were folded over her many-coloured apron, her olive-tinted face was paler than its wont, the thick, heavy fringe of eyelashes caused a shadow on her cheek.

Silas gave her another quick, admiring glance.

"She's a toolip, and a carnation, and a bit of a rose-bud all in one," he murmured under his breath. "Never seen her like afore. See how quiet she sets, and how little she minds all I says to her. She's

hard to win, like one of them skittish colts at home. But why compare her to a colt? she's a flower out and out. One o' they cuttings werry precious and hard to strike in strange soil. I like her all the better for it. There's breeding in every bit o' her."

"What shall I put in the basket to-day?" he continued. "How did the lilies go? and did the ladies wonder how you come by they choice rose-buds?"

These words roused Jill.

"You don't know what that basket wor," she said; "I sold off the flowers as fast as ever I could. They were lovely; there worn't sech a basket to be seen with any other flower girl."

Silas laughed "Ha, ha." He said, "We'll do better'n that to-day; I ha' thought the subjec' of that basket o' yourn out and out. I ha' planned one most cunning for to-day. You leave it to me, Jill, I'll fill it for yer. What do you say to a border all round o' these delicate green ferns, and then a row o' deep crimson carnations, and agen 'em something white, and then a mass o' blue forget-me-nots, and the centre all roses—every sort, cream, white, pink, blush, crimson? Wot do yer say to that sort o' basket, Jill Robinson?"

"It 'd be more beautiful than a pieter," said Jill, her eyes smiling. "Oh, Mr. Lynn, what lovely thoughts you has! I can most fancy I see that ere basket."

"You leave it to me, and you'll see it in real 'arnest," said Silas. "Ah, here comes breakfast. Now then, Jill, you shall pour out the coffee."

Jill stood up at once to perform her office. She did it without a scrap of self-consciousness. She was quite impervious to the glances of amusement which came from many pairs of eyes at the rough-looking flower merchant and the handsome girl. Her mind was too absorbed with something else to notice any of these outside matters; but Silas felt his heart swell within him as he took the large cup of coffee from Jill's little hands. He noticed fast enough how the folks looked at them both. These glances, these significant nods gave him intense pride and pleasure.

"Seems to me," he said under his breath, "as ef the little cuttin' was a-beginning to strike."

The meal was nearly over when Jill spoke again.

"Yere's ten shillin's for the flowers you give me yesterday, Silas Lynn," she said. "Ten shillin's, and my werry best thanks; and ef you will fill my basket with five shillin's' worth more flowers of the common sort, I'll be much obleeged."

While she was speaking, Silas's face, which had resembled a great beaming sun a moment ago, grew black.

"You keep that ten shillin's, or you'll anger me," he growled. "Ef you must give it back, give it back another day; but not now. Tell yer what, ef

yer give it to me now, I'll put it in my mouth and swaller it ; so there."

There was something so ferocious in the man's change of tone and change of face that Jill felt sick. She knew that she must humour him if there was the least chance of his acceding to her request.

"Mr. Lynn," she said suddenly, "I'll keep that money, and give you ten shillin's worth o' thanks instead. I don't mind saying as I come here to-day hoping as you'd do me a kindness."

Silas's brow cleared as if by magic.

"The little cuttin's a-strikin', not a doubt on it," he muttered.

"Do you a kindness, Jill Robinson?" he said aloud. "Well, that's quite arter my style. Let's hear wot you wants, lass. Say the words as low as you like, my pretty, I'm all a-listenin'." Silas bent down towards Jill as he spoke. "There," he said, "speak up, don't be afeared."

"I'm in a good bit o' trouble," she said, her lips trembling. "I told yer yesterday that I had lost some money. It worn't stole—don't yer think that, but it wor lost. I want to pay that money back again to-night. Will yer lend it to me, Mr. Lynn? Oh, there's nought under the sun I wouldn't do for yer ef you'd lend me that money what got lost."

"There's nought you wouldn't do for me," said

Silas. "Them words is pleasant to hear—werry, werry pleasant. I has took a fancy to yer, and I like to hear yer say 'there's nought you wouldn't do for me'; sech, for instance, as pouring out my coffee for me, eh? There, you're blushin', my gel; never mind never mind. How much is the money you want?"

"Maybe I ought not to ask," said Jill, starting from her seat and speaking nervously; "it's an orful lot—it's five pounds."

When Jill named the sum which she required, Silas could not help giving a start of astonishment. Flower girls like Jill had seldom anything to do with so large a sum of money. Silas was naturally a close man, and, much as he was taken with the pretty flower girl, he was obliged to think twice before deciding to lend her so much money. When she raised her dark eyes full of pleading to his face, however, and when their brilliance was veiled and softened behind tears, Silas could not help clapping his hand on his thigh and exclaiming, in a sudden burst of admiration:—

"'Tain't a toolip you are, lass; it's a bit of a moss-rosebud. Jiminy! if you ain't the very purtiest bit of a thing I ever clapped my eyes on—bar none."

"You will lend me the money, will you not?" said Jill.

"Wait a while; it's a big sum. There's a power of work in getting a lot of money like that together, and ef I give it away jest for a gel's whim——"

"No, no ; not for a girl's whim," said Jill, "but for her sore need—for her werry sore need. Oh, Silas Lynn, I know as you has got a really kind heart."

"Maybe I has, and maybe I han't. I won't lend the money unless you keep to your word. You said as you'd do anything for me. That means a deal. Do you abide by them words?"

"As far as I can, Mr. Lynn."

"You can abide by 'em ef you will. Now, for instance, ef I were to say there's a nice little cottage in the country awaiting for a missis, and I wor to say : 'Come, Jill, and be my own true love'—why, I declare I'm getting quite into the poetry vein. And ain't the pretty dear turned red? Shall it be a bargain, Jill Robinson?—I give you the five pounds, and you give me your nice little purty bit of a self."

"No, Mr. Lynn. No," said Jill. Little by little the colour had left her face ; even her lips were white. "I didn't understand it in that way," she said. "It can't be."

She took up her empty basket and went away.





CHAPTER X.



ILL never remembered afterwards how she spent that long day. She had no flowers to sell, for she had taken her basket empty from the market, leaving those that were over from the day before in a pail of water at home.

She was too restless, miserable, and anxious to sit doing nothing in Howard's Buildings. So she wandered the streets quite indifferent to the gaze of the many flower girls who knew her, and quite oblivious to the fact that her picturesque dress and beautiful face called for loud admiration from more than one passer-by.

Tired out at last, she went home. She was glad that the long day had come to an end. Nat would soon be with her now, and the worst would be over. She sat down in the empty kitchen and waited ; there was nothing whatever else for her to do. She had

thought about the lost money, and about what she should say to Nat so often, that at last her tired brain refused to think any more about it. She held on now only to one instinct. She must shield her mother at any cost. If necessary, she must even go to the length of telling Nat that she had given her mother the money.

She had come to this resolve when a quick step was heard on the stairs outside. A gay whistle accompanied the step, and then a hand knocked with gentle insistence on one of the panels of the door.

Jill went at once to open it. Nat was standing outside. He had dressed himself with some care, and when Jill threw open the door and looked at him, he presented as fine a picture of a young English lad of the people as heart could desire. His curly hair was damp with exercise, his face was tanned with much exposure to the weather; his honest, well-opened eyes were as blue as the sky. He was a tall young fellow, too, with broad shoulders and a well-knit frame.

"Eh, Jill!" he exclaimed, "I thought you'd be in, and awaiting for me. I had no time to send yer word; but I guessed somehow as a little bird might whisper to yer as I'd be looking round."

"Shall we go for a walk, Nat?" said Jill in a hasty voice. "I ain't quite well. Shall we go and take a walk on the Embankment? It's a fine evenin', ain't it?"

"Why in course; it's a beautiful evenin', sweetheart. We'll go out, ef you wish. But you has never given me a kiss, Jill. Don't you want to?"

"Yes, Nat," replied the poor girl. She took a sudden step forward, flung her arms round his neck, and placed her soft cheek against his. "I'd like to go out with yer," she said then. "We can talk about kissin' presently. I'm craving for the air."

She wrapped a bright shawl round her head. Nat took her hand and they went down-stairs.

"Ef there's anything as I must tell, it 'ud be easier out in the air," she murmured to herself.

For some time, however, Nat avoided all painful subjects. The two wandered down to the Embankment, and, going into the gardens, sat on one of the benches. They sat close together, and Nat's brown hand held Jill's under the gay apron which she still wore. A good many people passed them, and looked at them, and murmured to one another that this silly young pair were in a fool's paradise, and that they'd wish themselves out of it fast enough one day. It seemed to Jill afterwards, however, that they were all alone that evening, that no one looked at them as they sat on the bench together, that they had the gardens to themselves.

The sunset passed, and the stars shone in the dark blue of the sky, and Jill looked up at them and thought that, after all, it must be very easy to be good. She had forgotten her pain and anxiety for

the present ; the influence of the summer night was surrounding her, and the still more potent influence of young love was sending all fears to sleep.

"Nat," she said suddenly, "it seems as if the folks must be right."

"Wot folks, Jill?"

"Them folks as says there's a God, Nat, and that He lives up there. Seems to me that there must be a God, and that He's beautiful. I don't believe we could love each other as we do, but for God."

"Maybe," said Nat. "I han't thought much about it. I were allers too busy. Ef He made you love me, Jill, I'll go in for believing in Him ; that's sartin. But, oh ! my word, my word, there's a sight of misery in the world !"

"That's the devil's doing," said Jill in a frightened whisper. "I allers put the misery to the devil. But don't let us think on it to-night, Nat. Don't let's think on one miserable thing this beautiful night. Let's put all the pain out of sight. It's there for sure ; but let's put it out of sight. Do, Nat ; do, dear, darling Nat !"

"Why, my little love, you're all of a tremble. Take my 'and, and let's walk about a bit. We won't talk of miserable things, Jill—at least not yet awhile. Come out and look at the moon shining on the river. Ain't it prime ? And how the water ripples. Why, you're shivering still, Jill. Ain't yer well ?"

"Oh, yes, Nat ; I'm as well as a gel can be."

"Let's walk up and down then. I have everything planned for our wedding. I thought, maybe, we'd take a third-class fare down to Yarmouth or somewhere, and have a look at the real sea. I have an aunt at Yarmouth, a Mrs. Potter, and she'd give us a shake-down for nothink, I make sure. Wot does yer say, Jill?"

"I never looked at the sea," said Jill.

"Nor have I; folks say as there is nought like it. I believe we might give ourselves a week's holiday. I has put by a few pounds. Wot's the matter, Jill? You're shivering again."

"I wor thinking," said Jill, "that maybe I were wrong about God. Maybe He ain't up there."

"Why, Jill, what do you mean? And I do declare you have tears in your eyes. What is the matter, my little gel?"

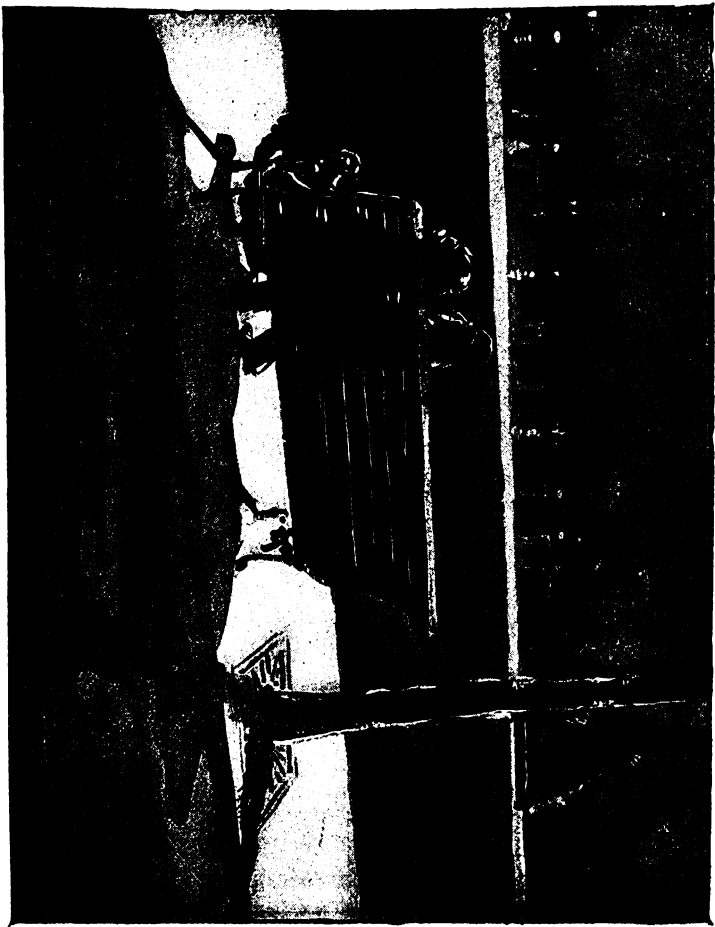
"Ef God was there," said Jill, "ef the beautiful God I pieter were there, He'd give us one perfect happy evening—oh, I know He would, I know He would!"

"And ain't this evening perfect and happy, Jill?"

"I can't keep the pain out," said Jill in a low voice. "I ha' tried, but it won't stay away. I'm thinking of mother, for one thing; she ain't very well."

"But we'll both take care on her when I'm your mate; and ef pain do come, we'll bear it together. There ain't a doubt as there's a heap of suffering in the world, and it seems to me as if it worn't right

“Seems to me that there must be a God.”



for us, however happy we wor, to shut our eyes to it. Why, look at me, I wor fit to burst my heart wid misery this morning, and yet when I were running up them stairs at Howard's Buildings and thought that with each step I were getting nearer to you, it seemed as ef I could have shouted for joy. I take it that I wor in one sense selfish—in another, no."

Nat looked at Jill as he spoke. For a moment she was silent, then she said in a husky voice—

"Why were you miserable this morning, Nat?"

"It wor about my mate, Joe Williams. You know I telled you about him. Him and me we shared the same barrer, and the same cart of flowers. Joe was as good a feller as breathed; but he worn't lucky. He had a sickly wife, for one thing, and four little bits of kids. He turned over a tidy bit of money; but he couldn't save, not ef he was to try ever so. It seemed as ef saving and prudence worn't in him. Do you think he'd pay a shilling a week to a buryin' club or a sick club, or aught of them clubs as is the stay of working men? No, no, that worn't Joe. It wor all spend, spend with him. To be sure his wife was sickly, and he couldn't deny her nothink, and she wor more to blame than he. That woman had a perfect crank for smelling out money. Ef Joe brought 'ome as much as 'arf-a-crown, meaning to save it for a rainy day, she'd unearth it. It were no use his trying to save, for Clara were more for spending even than hisself.

"Well, one day an uncle of his died, and left him five sovereigns in an old teapot. Joe gave the teapot to Clara, and said nothing about the windfall inside. But he gave them five sovereigns to me jest a week ago, wrapped up in the identical brown paper as I handed to you two nights back, Jill. And he says, says poor Joe, with a sort of a wink of a tear in his eye, 'Ef the worst comes, Nat, that'll bury me,' says he, 'and I won't be on the parish,' says he. I can tell you, Jill, that money wor like a millstone round me, I were so feart of losing it. And I were fine and glad when I handed it on to you, lass.

"Well, poor Joe, he dropped down dead yesterday morning, jest when he was coming to help me fill up the barrer. It were orful sudden, and poor Clara's nearly off her head."

Nat spoke huskily ; the sorrowful feelings of the morning were moving him again.

"He's dead," he continued ; "the best feller living, the kindest heart as breathed. I'll never meet his like, he wor that trusting and that companionable. We wor mates for close on three year, and never was there a word atween us. I can't get over his dying off so sharp ; but it is a good thing as you has the money safe, Jill."

"Yes ; that's a werry good thing," replied Jill. She paused again.

The moon was now riding in majesty across the

dark blue heavens ; the lovers had turned their steps towards Howard's Buildings. Jill was trembling no longer ; every nerve was on tension, each beat of her heart was warning her to be careful, to betray nothing. She wondered at her own sudden calm, at the power of brain with which she seemed endowed. She felt so still now, so capable of acting prudently in this terrible emergency, that she was even inclined to test Nat, to see for herself what he would do and how he would look if he really knew that his dead pal's money was gone.

"It is a good thing as I has them five sovereigns," she continued ; "but s'pose as they wor lost?"

"What do yer mean, Jill?" Nat's honest, open face clouded over, his blue eyes flashed a steely light of anger. "You oughtn't even to say sech a thing in jest," he continued.

"No, no, in course I oughtn't ; but it is a way with me to look at every side o' a picter. You giv'd the money two nights ago to a gel as could be trusted. You loved that gel, you thought a sight on her ; she had a mother the soberest o' women, and she herself were honest as the day. You're a lucky feller, Nat Carter, to have found a gel that lives up to yer creed. You're rare and lucky, though I say it as shouldn't, to marry a gel with sober, quiet, and honest relations. You wouldn't like it no other sort, would you?"

"I should think not," said Nat, quickening his

steps. "But why do you talk in that queer fashion, Jill?"

"It seems to ease my heart like; it's so nice to know as I'm jest what you want. Now, s'pose, jest s'pose for two minutes, dear Nat, that things worn't the way they are. S'pose I wor Jill still, with a heart all trembling with love to you, and my face the same as it is, and everything looking jest as it do now, but the inside, Nat, the inside o' your Jill quite different. S'pose, jest for the sake o' the thing, that my mother worn't a sober woman, that she'd take a drop too much sometimes, and sometimes go the length o' singing songs in the street, with a mob round her, and s'pose your Jill had to go and fetch her home and cossit her up and make purtense as she wor a very sober, 'spectable sort o' woman, and s'pose, still more, that when you giv'd me yer mate's money I didn't keep it safe, but I giv'd it to my por mother what worn't sober. You trusted Jill, and Jill worn't worthy, and your dead pal's money wor all gone, every stiver of it. You look at that picter, Nat, and say what you'd do with sech a Jill as I ha' drawed out. Would you take her to your heart and say, 'Never mind, poor Jill, you loves me, and that makes up for all. Your mother ain't sober and you ain't true; but your love is true, and I'll take you to be my wife.' That wouldn't be your way, would it, Nat?"

"How wildly you talk, Jill. I think you must be a-going to have fever."

"No; I ain't goin' to have any fever, and I ain't talking wildly. Answer me. Would you take the Jill as I have pictured to be your wife?"

"Take the child of a drunken mother," said Nat; "take a false gel, what wor the werry worst kind of a thief, to be my wife! No, thank yer. Don't talk on it, Jill; it pains me; it seems sort o' cruel to yourself even to speak on such matters."

"But," said Jill, "one moment, Nat. You wouldn't have her—you're sartin sure, even ef she had my face; the face you loves, the face you think werry lovely."

Jill threw off her many-coloured shawl as she spoke; her dark eyes gloomy in their great depths, were raised to Nat's; her little brown well-shaped hands were placed on his shoulders, her lips were parted in a faint smile, the gleam of her pearly teeth just showed. There was a passion of love and longing in her gaze which stirred the young man to the very depths of his being. Nevertheless, what a horrible picture she had drawn! A false Jill, a thief, the daughter of a drunkard!

"No, no," he said, almost pushing her clinging hands away; "sech a Jill 'ud be nought, and worse than nought to me. Ef she had ten times your beauty I'd spurn her. I'd push her from me. Don't talk on her no more—don't think on her. Put your hand inside my arm, my little love, and let's walk fast, for you're beginning to shiver again. Why did you talk so strangely, Jill?"

"A fancy I had," said Jill in a light tone. "It's over now; let's talk o' pleasant things again. When'll you want your mate's money, Nat? Shall I give it to yer to-night?"

"No, not to-night; I'll come round and fetch it to-morrow some time."

"About what time, Nat?"

"Let me see; I ha' a deal to do for poor Clara Williams in the morning. I'll come in the arfternoon, as early as I can."

"Well, we're back at Howard's Buildings now," said Jill, with a little sigh, "and I must go up home. Kiss me, Nat; put your arms tight round me and kiss me."

"My little love!" said Nat Carter.

"Hold me a bit tighter, Nat, dear. I want to kiss yer werry, werry hard for a minute. Good-night, Nat."

"Good-night, Jill, my own little love."

Jill kissed her hand twice to her lover, who stood and watched her as she vanished up the steep stone stairs of Howard's Buildings.





CHAPTER XI.



ILAS LYNN left Covent Garden at an early hour, and went home. He had a very neat little waggon for conveying his goods to town, and he sat in it now, in the pleasant sunshine, and gave himself up to reverie.

He was very much startled and amazed at his own action that morning. He had not only made love to a very young and very pretty girl, but he had asked her to come down to the country and share his bit of a cottage with him.

He had asked her to take him for better, for worse. He had asked her to belong to him for ever and ever ; it was really a tremendous thing to do, a rash, overwhelming sort of thing. Here was Silas, a grim, sour, gnarled old bachelor (he was not very far from forty years of age), asking a bit of a lass whom he knew little or nothing about to be his wife.

Silas was known amongst the neighbours as a woman-hater—as a gruff, disagreeable, churlish sort of man, and yet now he was in love ; absolutely in love with a pretty girl who possessed a pair of dark eyes for her dower, who was nothing whatever but a London flower girl, possessed of all the knowledge, and probably all the wickedness, that that name implied, and who owed somebody or other the large, the enormous sum of five pounds.

“It’s a good thing as she wouldn’t have me,” said Silas, as he sat in the front of the waggon, and “gee-upped ” to his horses. “It’s a right good thing for me. She’d have been my undoing, sure as sure ; a dainty bit of a thing with a purty way and a proud look ; full of breedin’ ; and yet nothing but a London gel. Oncommon like the flowers all the same ; painted up by the Almighty hisself—roses in her cheeks, fire in her eyes, and—my word ! her lips, haven’t they a dash of colour in ’em ! The Almighty made her very ’ticing—there’s no doubt on that pint. Worn’t she sweet just when she ’anded me that coffee ; my word, it tasted like new honey. But all the same it’s well I’m rid on her. I’ll have forgotten her by Monday. There’s the new colt to be broken in, and that bed of dahlias wants thinnin’ ; I’ll say anything too that Jonathan’s coorting that wench Hepsibah, ’stead of looking arter the young sparrer-grass. Oh, my hand’s full, and I’m well quit of a bit o’ a girl like that ’un.”

Having reached home, Silas put up his tired horses, watered and groomed them, saw to their comforts in every particular, and then went into the little cottage which he had offered to share with Jill.

Silas was a very prosperous market-gardener. He had what might be called a certain knack with flowers and vegetables. Under his touch they thrived. His blossoms were larger than those of any other market-gardener round. He did not go in so extensively for fruit, but even his fruit was better and more abundant than his neighbours'.

It was generally known that Silas was a man of substance. Every Monday he might have been seen trudging on foot to the nearest market town, entering the Bank, and going home again with a satisfied expression on his strong, rough face.

Everyone knew what Silas did in the Bank. He was storing his money there, putting away every week his hard-earned savings.

Notwithstanding his success, however, he was a very morose and churlish man. He never exchanged friendly words with his fellow creatures. He never invited his neighbours to partake of his hospitality. He was very good to his flowers, and scrupulously kind to his animals. But that he had any duties to perform to humanity at large, never entered into his calculations.

Although his small farm was so prosperous, and his horses so comfortably housed, the little cottage where

he lived himself was of the most meagre description. It was very old, and in its best days was but a poor residence.

Silas said, however, that the two-roomed dwelling was good enough for him, and he would have been a brave man, and she a remarkable plucky woman, who had dared to suggest to Silas Lynn that he might with advantage enlarge his dwelling.

He entered his house now, put a match to some bits of sticks and some small lumps of coal, which had been left ready laid in the grate, and, sitting down on a hard wooden chair, which was much polished with age and service, glanced complacently around him.

When the fire blazed he would put the kettle on to boil, and make himself a dish of tea—he called it a dish because that had been his old mother's way of expressing it. He would drink his tea strong and bitter, without the luxuries of milk and sugar, and take with it a slice from a quartern loaf which stood in the cupboard, and a thick cut from the cold bacon which he always kept in the house.

After this frugal meal he would be sufficiently rested to go out to thin the dahlias.

Silas had quite made up his mind to forget Jill; nevertheless, he found his thoughts running back to her in a way which both perplexed and irritated him. He said to himself,

“ I has took too much notice of the gel. She's

nought but a common gel, when all's said and done ; and I has maybe turned my own head a comparing of her to the flowers made by the Lord God Almighty. It's a good thing she wouldn't have me ; yes, it's a right good thing. Praise the Lord for all His mercies, Silas Lynn. Drink yer tea and munch yer bacon, and forget the hussy."

Lynn put the kettle on to boil as he spoke. Then he looked round the tiny kitchen.

"My certy, what a mess I wor near making of myself," he muttered. "As ef she'd have been content with mother's old room !"

The kitchen was very small ; Lynn knew every inch and corner of it, but he found himself examining it now with new and critical eyes.

"A more comfortable room there can't be," he said to himself. "But it ain't the place for a London gel. What 'ud she do with the old eight-day clock, and the bit of the dresser where mother kept the dishes ? She'd come in with her fallals and her fashions, and afore a week wor out I wouldn't know my own place. Mother's arm-chair 'ud most like be moved from its corner, and the bunch of lavender that she sewed up herself in the muslin bag, and pinned over the mantelshelf, would be put behind the fire ; and mother's big Bible changed for a yeller-backed novel. Oh, lor, what an escape I has had ! God, be thanked again for all his mercies."

The kettle boiled ; Silas made his tea, ate his

bread and bacon, and went out. He worked hard amongst his dahlias for two or three hours, scolded his servant Jonathan in round full terms, saw to the breaking in of the colt, and the comfort of his two patient waggon horses, and finally retired to his cottage when the stars were out and the moon shining. It was the very same moon that was looking down at this moment on Jill in her passion and anguish. But Silas knew nothing of this. He called the moon "My lady," and bobbed his head to it after a fashion taught him by his mother. Then he went into his cottage, locked the door, lit a small paraffin lamp, and set himself to read his accustomed chapter out of the big Bible before going to bed.

Silas was a Wesleyan, and a very devout adherent of that religious body. He went twice every Sunday to the little Wesleyan chapel in the village close by, and on more than one occasion had himself been induced to deliver a prayer at the revival meetings.

Silas had a stentorian pair of lungs, and he could sing the old-fashioned Methodist hymns to the old tunes with immense effect. He was fond of giving way to his fancy on these occasions, and would supplement the tune with many additional twists and turns. He scorned to sing anything but a high and harsh treble, considering that the one and only quality necessary for rendering hearty praise to the Creator was noise.

Silas liked singing in the chapel, he liked praying

aloud, he would not have at all objected to addressing his "fellow-worms," as he called them, Sunday after Sunday. Above all things, he liked laboriously spelling out verse by verse a chapter of his mother's Bible at night. He was not a fluent reader ; perhaps because he only practised this art to the extent of that one chapter nightly. He liked to ponder over the words, and to move his big thumb slowly from word to word as he came to it. He never skipped a verse or a chapter, but read straight on, beginning the next night exactly where he had left off the night before. He was going through the Book of the Proverbs now, and he made shrewd comments as he read.

"Ha, ha," he said to himself, "don't never tell me as there's a man living now wot beats the great King Solomon for wisdom. Take him on any subjec', and he's up on it, with all the newest lights too. Natrel history, for instance ! hark to him on the conies and ants. Listen to him 'bout bees—why it's quite wonderful. Then, again, take gardening—seems to me Solomon was a born gardener. Don't Holy Writ say of him that he knew the names of all the flowers, and could he do that if he worn't about among 'em—a-tying of 'em up, and digging at their roots, and watering 'em, and taking cuttin's from the choicest of 'em ? Folks tell of King Solomon in all his glory, but I seem to see him most often out among the flowers, a-petting and a-tending of 'em, and learning

all those store of names by heart. But take Solomon all round, and his knowledge of the ways of women beats everything. Hark to the verse in this chapter : 'Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.' That were my mother's sort—no beauty in her, and no favour—a downright woman, plain in her way, and a bit primity in her notions ; but, oh, the goodness of her, and the fear o' God that shone round about her, making a sort of savour all round her like a sweet-smelling flower ! Jill minded me o' her, but not in looks, for the poor gel has them things spoken so strongly agin by King Solomon. But for all that there was a sweetness in her that seemed to me this morning when I looked into her eyes to be more'n skin-deep. Most like I'm wrong. I've the Bible agin me, anyhow, and I ought to be thankin' the Lord on my knees for having saved me from the enticing wiles of that poor gel."

As a rule, Silas spent his short night without a dream, but the events of the past day had disturbed his somewhat slow nature. His brain had received an impression of a girl's grace, freshness and beauty, which had penetrated straight from the brain to the heart.

Silas fully believed that by Monday morning he should have forgotten Jill ; that her image would fade from his mental sight, her voice cease to sound on his mental ears. He did not know that

he was never to forget her—that from henceforth to his dying day he would carry her image tenderly, sacredly in the inner shrine of his heart.

The little rosy god of love had come and touched Silas, and he could no more resist his influence than the flowers in his own garden could refrain from growing and expanding in the sunshine. So, quite contrary to his wont, Silas Lynn spent his night in dreams. Jill figured in each of these visions. Sometimes she was angry with him, sometimes appealing, sometimes indifferent. She was in danger, and he was the one to save her. She was surrounded by prosperity, and he was the benefactor who brought these good things to her feet.

All the time, however, through all the happenings of these queer distorted dreams, he and Jill were together. It did not surprise Silas, therefore, when early on that Sunday morning he awoke, to hear some one knocking at his door.

"Yes, I'm coming," he said, still believing that he was in a dream.

"I want you very badly, Silas Lynn," called Jill from the other side of the door.

Then he knew that he was awake, and that she had come to him. All the prudent thoughts of yesterday had flown to the winds. He found himself absolutely trembling with eagerness, joy, ecstasy.

"Yes, I'm a-coming ; I'll be with yer in a minute, Jill," he called out. "For," he said to himself as he



"Jill was standing outside, leaning wearily against the post of the door,"

tumbled into his clothes, "it's too wonderful for anything. Who'd ha' thought—who *would* have thought that a dainty bit of a cuttin' like that 'ud go and take root in a rough soil like this here? It's a fact nevertheless. Nothing less 'ud bring her here at this time. o' the morning. 'Favour is deceitful and beauty is vain'—not a bit on it—you're wrong for once, King Solomon."

Having dressed himself, Silas quickly unlocked the cottage-door.

Jill was standing outside, leaning wearily against the post of the door. Her neat black dress was covered with dust, her apron was unpinned, her gay-coloured shawl had fallen back from her shapely head, and her black hair, in some disorder, was tumbled about her face. Jill's face was very white. Silas felt himself absolutely colouring crimson as he came out to her, but not a tinge of shyness or embarrassment were in the wide-open eyes she raised to his.

"I ha' come," she said, speaking in a choking, husky voice, "for the loan of the money. I know wot it means, Silas, but I ha' come all the same."

"You know what it means?" said Silas Lynn, clasping both her small, cold hands in one enormous palm. "Do you mean to tell me that we are to wed each other, Jill Robinson? Are we to go afore the pa'son, and take each other for better and for worse?"

"Ef you like," said Jill wearily. "I ha' come for the money first. That's the first thing. We can talk of t'other later on. The money's the first thing."

"Yes, yes. Why, you are all in a tremble! You must want that ere money bitter bad, Jill Robinson. Look me in the eyes, gel, and say as you'll play me no tricks arter I have gived it to yer."

"I'll be quite true to you, Mr. Lynn."

"Now, don't you speak in them stiff tones. Say 'Silas,' my pretty. Say 'I'll be quite true to you, Silas.'"

"I'll be quite true to you, Silas," repeated Jill.

"And you love me?"

"I—I'll try."

"Look you yere, Jill—" Silas was getting command of the situation now. His heart was opening out under these full beams of love and rapture. "Look you yere," he said, "ef you're true to me, Jill Robinson, and ef you love me even a little, and think nothink of no other feller—why, now I swear as there ain't gel in the land as 'ull have a better husband. There'll be love all round you, Jill; and what can't that do? And ef I'm rough to outsiders you'll never see nothink o' it, my little gel; your wishes 'ull be mine, and your friends 'ull be mine, and your fancies will be my fancies. Day and night I'll serve yer; and there ain't any gel, no, not even if she's a princess, 'ull have a truer mate. I wor a

good son to my mother wots in 'eaven, and I'll be a good husband to you, you pretty bit of a dainty flower—ef you'll do your part. Faithful and true, that's all I arsk. Is it a bargain, Jill? As to the money part, I could give yer ten times five pounds, ef yer wanted it—that's neither here nor there; but the other part of the bond I must ha' your promise on. Faithful and true—you'll be that. D'ye hear me, Jill?"

"Yes," said Jill, "I'll do my part. I'll think o' none but you; I'll be true to you in word and deed."

"Then that's right. I'll ask no more questions. There's a home for yer mother in my 'ouse, Jill, and full and plenty for you from this moment forward; and we'll get spliced up as soon as may be, gel."

"But the money," said Jill. "It's part of the bond between us, that I should ha' the money and no questions asked."

"You shall ha' the money, and I'll ask no questions, ef you don't want to tell me."

"I can't tell you, Mr. Lynn. The money were give to me in trust, and it got lost, although no one stole it. I must give it back to the one wot's lent it to me this werry artemnoon."

"You shall have it, my gel. Now come into the house, and I'll get yer a cup of tea. 'Ow did yer come to me, Jill? And how did you find my bit of a shanty?"

"It were this way," said Jill. "I found last night, quite late last night, that the lost money must be gived back to-day. And I thought of you, and I 'membered how real kind you were. It worn't that I loved you, Silas Lynn. I'll try to in future, but it worn't with any thought of love that I 'membered you last night. But as I sat all in desolation, I see



"I walked the rest of the way."

your face, kind and smiling, and tender-like, a-looking at me, and I said I'll go to Silas, and he'll save me fro' my misery."

"That wor right—that wor a good thought," interposed the man.

"I went out then, and I came to a shop just close to the market, where I guessed as they'd know 'bout

you. It wor a flower-shop ; the man's name is Thomson. And Thomson said, as good luck 'ud have it, he were just starting an empty waggon back into Kent, to be ready for a load of strawberries for Monday's market. And ef I liked, he said, I could have a lift in it.

"So I spent the night in the waggon, Silas, and in the morning the waggon set me down nigh upon four miles off, and I walked the rest of the way.

"That's all," continued Jill, heaving a sigh, and sinking down into the old straw chair which had remained empty in Silas's house since his mother's death.

"There you be," said Silas, clasping his hands in ecstasy. "You mind me o' the lavender, as well as t'other and gayer flowers. There's something wondrous subtle and sweet about yer—mignonette, too, you take arter, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised ef I found cherry-pie flavour in yer before long. Verbeny and sweet-briar you air, and no mistake. But there, I must see and get yer a cup o' tea, for you're sore spent, my poor little cuttin', and you won't strike into this yere honest breast, ef I don't see arter the watering."

The members of the Wesleyan chapel to which Silas belonged would scarcely have known him this morning. The fact that he was expected to lead their choir was absolutely obliterated from his mind. It is very much to be doubted if he even remem-

bered that the day on which Jill came to him was Sunday.

Jonathan, his factotum, and one servant, appeared presently on the scene, and nearly jumped when he saw his rough, fierce-looking master tenderly offering tea, minus milk and sugar, to the prettiest picture of a girl Jonathan's eyes had ever rested on.

"You there!" shouted the master, "make yerself useful. Go round to Farmer Ladd's, and bring in a pint o' cream and a slab o' butter, and ask ef the missis has a plump spring chicken ready plucked for roasting. And go on to Dawson's in the village, and get a loaf of white bread. Quick! D'ye hear! Wot are ye staring at?"

"But it's the Sawbath," said Jonathan, dropping his jaws.

"Ef it's fifty Sawbaths, go and do my biddin'. D'ye hear!"

Jonathan flew off; and strange whispers soon after began to circulate in the village with regard to that soberest and soundest of men, Silas Lynn.

But all the time Silas himself was in the Garden of Eden, for surely no Sunday like this had ever dawned before in his austere life.

"Ain't the flowers purtty?" he said to Jill. "Never did I see anythink like 'em. Seems as if they knowed. Do look at the perky airs o' them pansies! Sauce is no name for 'em—staring up at us two in that unblushing fashion. Eh, Jill, did you speak, my gel?"

"The flowers are like picters, Silas. I never see flowers like this all a-growin' before. It's very soothin' to look on. They seem to still the 'eart."

"Well, my 'eart's a-bobbing and a-banging," said Silas. "There's no stilling o' it to-day, nor for many another day, I guess. My word, wen you speak of yer 'eart being stilled, sounds as ef you were in pain of some sort."

"No, Silas, I'm werry 'appy. But there's a deal of pain in the world, you knows; and it's comfortin' to think as the flowers is meant for them as suffers. I must be asking yer for the money now, Silas, for I ha' got to take the next train back to Lunnun."

"I'll come with yer, my gel."

"No, please don't. It's a bargain that I am to give the money back to the one what gi' it to me to keep, and no questions arsked. That's a bargain, ain't it, Silas Lynn?"

"To be sure, Jill. You don't suppose as I doubts yer, my pretty little cuttin'? You come along to the 'ouse, and I'll get the money out. 'Ow'll yer take it? In silver or gowld?"

"I'd like five sovereigns best, Silas, ef you had 'em."

"Well, we'll see. You set there in the porch, and I'll go and look."

Silas presently returned with five new sovereigns, which he placed in Jill's open palm. It was delightful to him to give. He had no idea that this gold was the price of freedom and of a girl's first love.

"My word, how still she sets," he muttered. "Breeding through and through. Wot flower is she most like now? The lavender, I'm thinking—so primity and shut-up like in its ways. She'll make a wife in a thousand. I'm 'bout the luckiest feller in Christendom."





CHAPTER XII.



QUITE early in the afternoon Jill returned to the humble little flat in Howard's Buildings. She had felt nervous and excited until she got there. Nat might be waiting for her. Nat might have come and discovered her not there and gone away again, and the first suspicion of cold doubt might already have reached him. But when Jill discovered that Nat Carter had not yet arrived ; when she questioned Mrs. Stanley, who assured her emphatically that that handsome young man, her sweetheart, had not put in an appearance, she suddenly felt a strange quiet and almost apathy stealing over her.

She sat quietly in her mother's chair and folded her hands on her lap.

She had got a task to perform, but the pain, the agony, which such work ought to cause her was not present at this moment. Nat should have his mate's

money back again, but Jill must tell him that she could never be his wife.

"There's no help for it," she muttered. "I must tell Nat as I can't never wed him. I must make myself seem bad in his eyes. There ain't nothing else for me to do. He'll never know now, never to his dying day, that poor mother stole that ere money. The money part 'ull seem all right to him, but Jill—he'll allers think o' Jill as fickle and false. I must make him think that—there's no help for me. I'll wed Silas, and I'll try to be good to him, and I must forget Nat wot I loves."

Thoughts like these passed swiftly through the tired girl's brain. She knew that she must soon speak cruel words. She must say good-bye to Nat.

"And I love him mor'n aught else in all the wide world," she groaned. "I love mother—oh, I do love mother—but Nat—Nat comes first. If it were a case o' choosing, perhaps I'd be mean enough to cling on to Nat, and let poor mother go, but it ain't a case of choosing. Nat's young and strong; he ha' got a true, true heart, and an honest face, and he's 'spectable—oh, he's *bitter* 'spectable. There are lots of nice girls in the world, and Nat 'ull get his pick, and it's best for him to have nothing to say to a girl what have a mother what drinks. Nat's all right; he'll comfort hisself soon; it'll be easy for Nat to get another wife; but poor mother, she has no one but me, for the boys they don't count. Mother suffers bad pain, and she's

nearly distraught with one sorrow and another. It ain't a case o' choice. I must cling to poor mother."

When Jill came to this point in her reflections she rose and went into the inner room. Seeing her dishevelled and untidy appearance in the little square of looking-glass, her first instinct was to brush her black hair smooth, and wash her face, and bring her whole little person back to the absolute order and fresh neatness which was part of her beauty; but on second thoughts she refrained from doing this. Her object now was to put Nat against her.

"It'll cut him much less to the 'art ef he sees for his own self that I ain't the Jill he thought I were," she murmured.

She threw off her shawl, therefore, and, with a sigh of physical discomfort, came back again to the kitchen.

She had scarcely done so before Nat's knock was heard at the door. She went at once and opened it for him.

"Is that you?" she said. "You might ha' come sooner. I were getting tired o' waiting; it's dull settin' indoors on a fine Sunday. Come in ef you want to, though."

Her tone was almost flippant. Nat opened his blue eyes in astonishment. He himself was in the most irreproachable Sunday go-to-meeting dress. He wore a button-hole of carnations. The sweet scent of that special flower gave Jill a sick, faint feeling for

many a day afterwards. His hair was brushed from his broad white forehead. There was a fresh colour in his cheeks, and his happy eyes looked like a bit of the sky.

Jill's untidy, almost slovenly, appearance distressed him nearly as much as her change of voice, but he determined to take no notice. He came in and sat down, therefore, and said after a very brief pause in a gentle voice,

"It wor Clara Williams wot kep' me. The poor thing is nearly distraught with misery. It's quite piteous to see her. And as to those four little orphans, wot is to come o' them? I'm sorry I were late, Jill, but we can go out now and have a real jolly time. I can give you the rest of the day, sweetheart. Ain't yer mother home, Jill? Wor yer alone all the morning, my little love?"

"Indeed, no," said Jill, "I had company, and fine company too, but it worn't mother. Mother's out. She ain't very well, and she wants lots o' air and exercise, but I hadn't a dull time, so don't you think it, Nat."

"Well, I'm glad on it. You may be quite sure I were thinking on yer when I were doing things for Clara Williams. I'm right glad you worn't dull. Shall we go out now, Jill?"

"No, thank yer, I'm dead beat. I have been out already for hours. I s'pose you has come for the money, Nat. Here it is back. You count it and see ef I ain't stole none."

Nat raised his eyes in astonishment. Jill, who was standing with her back slightly turned to him, held out the money in the identical brown paper wrapper which he had given her the five sovereigns in.

"Here, take it, I'm well rid on it," she said impatiently.

Nat held out his hand and took the little parcel.

"Open it," she said ; "count the sovereigns. You 'member as you give me five sovereigns. See for yerself that they are all there."

"Why, what is come to you, Jill?" said Nat. "You speak queer. I don't seem to know you to-day."

Jill gave a short little laugh.

"I has many sides," she said. "Sometimes I'm all honey, sometimes I'm all winegar. It's best as the man what mates me should know me all round."

"Yes," said poor Nat, "and I thought I did know yer all round, Jill : I made sure on it. I allers said as I'd never marry in haste. It's an orful thing, marriage. Once done it can't be undone ; and I said as the gel what I took for wife should be my friend for many and many a day first. You 'member when we wor at school together, Jill. How I took yer part, and how yer sat near me, and how straight you always wor, never skulking away from yer lessons and never shirking the truth. You wor a bit o' tom-boy, no doubt, but you wor true and sweet all round. You has growed up true and sweet, and more beau-

tiful nor any picter. There's no winegar in you, my own Jill, but there's a cloud over yer. Come and tell me about it. Put yer head here on my breast and tell me all 'bout it."

"No, no, Nat," said Jill; "I don't say as there ain't a cloud. I don't want, even on this bitter day, to say words what ain't true, but there's no goin' to you for comfort any more, for we must part."

"Part!" said Nat, "part!" His lips fell apart, his blue eyes flashed an angry fire. Then he closed his mouth firmly, and a hard look settled down on his handsome face. "Do yer mean as you're tired on me?" he said. "You ha' spoke werry strange since I come in, and you ha' looked werry strange. Do you repent o' our bargain? Do you want not to be my mate? Why do you keep your back turned to me, Jill? Look into my face—look up into my face and tell me the truth."

"It's quite true as I can't mate you, Nat."

Jill turned swiftly as she spoke; out of her big beautiful eyes looked for a second an agonised soul; but Nat could not catch a glimpse of this frightened, steadfast, loving soul, in the cruel agony which her words gave him.

"You're tired of our bargain?" he repeated.

"Yes, that's it; I'm tired o' it."

"And you don't want to wed me?"

"No."

"Then I'd best be goin'," said Nat.

He took up his hat and walked as far as the door.

"Ha' you counted the money—are you sure as it's all right?" called Jill after him.

"'Course it's all right; what matters the money? You go and break a chap's 'eart, and you talk to him o' money. You send a chap right away to the devil, and you talk to him o' money. What's money to me to-day! I say, curse all women, curse goodness. I say—oh, Jill, Jill, you don't mean it. It's a trick you're playing on me. Jill, my little love, my little sweetheart, come back to me—come back."

Nat's voice was broken. He flung his hat on the floor, and, rushing up to the young girl, clasped her tightly in a passionate embrace.

For just a quarter of a minute she yielded to it. She felt the strength of the arms she loved. She said to herself,

"I can't go on. Even for mother's sake, I can't go on with this."

But then the remembrance of Nat's words of the night before, the remembrance of that cruel creed of his, which only believed in honesty, sobriety, and truth, came back like a cold wave to turn aside the warm impulses of nature.

"No, Nat," she said, detaching herself from him, "you must believe wot I say. We ha' got to part. I did think as I loved yer, and it did seem nice and beautiful to me, the thought of living with yer—but you're too high—too high for the likes o' Jill. Ef

you wedded me, you'd turn bitter agen me, for I ain't what you think ; I must ha' my fling. May be I don't think them things wrong that you hold by.



"Good-bye, Nat."

Wot's a lie now and then, if it serves a good purpose, and wot's jest not being too perticler 'bout change, and returning all the pennies you get, and selling withered flowers for fresh ! There's a lot of fuss made

by some folks about that sort of thing—I know what you thinks ; but I call that sort of thing soft. Poor folks has got to live, and they can't be over perticler. And then, Nat—you holds a deal on to sobriety—mother, she has a horror even o' a drop o' beer ; but me, when I'm *werry* tired, it's comfortin'. I don't go for to deny that it's *werry* comfortin'. Wot's the matter, Nat? How white you ha' got. I'm up to the average gel, ain't I, Nat? I'm not all white like an angel ; but I ain't black neither, am I, Nat?"

"I has got a blow," said Nat Carter. "You're right, Jill. I don't know yer all round. I has promised to wed yer, and I'll stick to it, if you're o' that mind. God forgive you, Jill, you're not what I thought, but I'll be a good husband to yer, if yer wishes it."

"Do I wish it?" said Jill with sudden scorn and passion. "Let the righteous wed with the righteous, and the sinner with the sinner. I'm as God made me ; I'm full of passion, and I'm full of weakness. You're white, and I'm black ; but, Nat, where I loves I don't see the sin. Ef you were as black as a coal, Nat, and loved me, I'd love you back again. Oh me, me, my heart's broke, but I can't never, never be yer mate now, Nat Carter."

"And yet it seemed all right last night," said the young man.

"No. I had my doubts last night, and now they're certainties. I doubted then as you was too high, and

me too low for us to come together, now my doubts is turned to certainties. Good-bye, Nat, good-bye ; choose a gel that never telled a lie, what would scorn to steal, and what wouldn't touch a drop o' beer to save her life ; good-bye, Nat."

"Good-bye," said Nat. He took up his hat in earnest this time. Jill's words had frozen him. There was a numbness all over him, which prevented his feeling the real agony of the parting ; he turned the handle of the room door and went out. Jill listened to his footsteps going down the stairs, till they died away in the distance.





CHAPTER XIII.

SUSY CARTER was one of those self-reliant people who are not overtroubled with conscience. Her nerves were in excellent order. She did not consider herself vain, but she was thoroughly satisfied with her life, with her ways, with her ideas. She utterly scorned the flower girls who did not live up to the high standard which she had set herself. Had Susy been born in a different station of life, she would have gone in for the education craze, for the women's suffrage question, and for all those extreme ideas of so-called emancipation which agitated the breasts of the sterner members of her sex.

Susy was not lovable, nor did she greatly love anyone but herself. She was ambitious and intended to rise in the world. Even a London flower girl can have ambition. As in all other callings, that of

the flower girl has many grades. Between the poor, little, sloppy, ragged victim, who hawks miserable, withered flowers, reeking with stale vegetation and the infection of badly ventilated rooms, and such a flower girl as Susy Carter, there is a very vast gulf fixed.

Susy heard of the Flower Girls' Guild, she was one of the first to join this admirable band, she delighted in the sanitary conditions imposed upon her. She paid her shilling a week regularly, and enjoyed all the advantages of the room where the flowers were kept at night, and the nice wash which she could give herself there in the morning.

Nature had made Susy fair and pretty, and the becoming uniform of the Guild suited her to perfection. Since she had joined it she had become more popular as a flower girl than ever. Her flowers were better in quality, and the ladies who bought from her, finding this fact out, were only too glad to come to her again ; week after week she was steadily putting away money. If this state of things went on Susy hoped that in a few years she might have saved enough either to marry a respectable costermonger or to start a barrow, or even a shop for herself. Susy had not the least idea of marrying for love, she was thoroughly satisfied with her present life, which had a certain amount of excitement without undue hardship.

Nat and Susy Carter had neither father nor mother,

they were somewhat alike in appearance, and had certain traits of character in common. They were both ambitious, hard-working, honest, respectable, but where Susy's soul was small and crabbed, shrinking indeed from its normal size from want of any due care or attention, Nat's was strong and brave, for Nat's soul was saved by the intense love which he had felt for some years now for Jill. Nat and Susy shared the same rooms, and these rooms were by no means to their taste. They were in a low part of the town, not exactly in Drury Lane, but in that poor neighbourhood. The situation was most convenient, not far from the market and in the very thick of the life which they were obliged to lead, but the rooms occupied by the brother and sister, though fairly clean in themselves, were by no means to the taste of either. Nat would not have stayed there but for the hope that he and Jill would soon set up housekeeping together, and Susy quite made her mind to share Nat's home whenever he made it. She was sitting on this particular Sunday afternoon in their little kitchen, leaning somewhat discontentedly out of the window, and wishing that the long dull Sabbath would come to an end, when to her surprise the door of the room was suddenly opened and Nat came in. Susy could not help giving a start of astonishment. Nat had left her some hours ago with a distinct understanding that he would not return until night. Susy had given him a slightly

contemptuous look when he had told her what his day's work would be.

"Yes, yes," she muttered, "don't tell me no more; you'll be a good Samaritan all the morning, and a lover all the arternoon. Each one to their taste, don't tell me no more."

"It 'ud do you good, Susy, to have a lover of your own," said Nat, in reply to these bitter words; "a right good 'ansome feller as 'ud draw the 'eart out of yer, and make yer feel."

"'Ow?" said Susy, looking at him with mocking eyes.

Nat reddened. A vision of Jill as she had looked the night before with the moonlight shining all over her passionate, tender face flashed before him.

"I can't say," he replied. "You wait and see."

"No, I'll never see that sight," said Susy; "there ain't a man living as 'ud make a fool on me. Give me a tidy bit of money, and I don't mind what the *man* is like."

Nat closed the door behind him with a faint sigh. It was the first touch of that depression which was to seize him in such a mighty clutch later in the day. Susy, in spite of herself, felt dull after he had left her. She wondered if she should go to church, but decided against this effort, and seating herself in the window began to unpick the trimming off an old hat, and to put it on again in a fresher style. She then warmed some tea for her dinner, and boiled an

egg to eat with her stale bread and butter. Afterwards she took up a penny novelette which she had borrowed from her landlady, and tried to interest herself in the impossible story which it contained. The hero of the tale was of course a duke, and the heroine was in a very slightly more exalted position than Susy herself. The duke loved the maiden, and the romance ended in a brilliant wedding, in a shower of rice, and old satin slippers. Susy threw down the novelette with an impatient sigh. With all her faults she had plenty of sense, and the mawkish, impossible tale sickened her.

"I call it stuff," she said to herself. "Dooks don't marry gels like me. I'd a sight rayther read about a costermonger. A costermonger's flesh and blood to me, a dook ain't nothing but a sort of a sperit. Oh, my word, is that you, Nat? 'Ow you did startle me!"

"I come in quietly enough," said Nat. "I suppose I needn't come into my own room on tiptoe, need I?"

Susy gave her brother a long attentive stare.

"My, how crusty you've turned!" she exclaimed in her mocking voice. "Wot's up with yer? 'As Jill been giving yer a spice of her mind? I allers said that gel 'ad the 'eart of a tiger."

"Look here, Susy," said Nat, "you stop that!" He came over and took the slim girl by her shoulders, and whirled her suddenly out into the centre of the

room. "You and me," continued Nat, "are brother and sister, ain't we?"

"Yes, Nat, yes. Oh, my word; 'ow you sets my 'eart a-thumping."

"Stop talking, and listen to me. I want to say something."

"Well, well."

"*Will* yer stop talking? I'll shake the breath out of yer if yer don't. Now, then, you listen. Oh, you poor good-for-nothing, you poor small good-for-nothing bit of a *thin* soul, you belong to me, I s'pose, and I must stick to yer. I'm yer brother, and I must hold on to yer till you gets a husband of some sort. But look yere, Susy, ef yer mentions Jill Robinson's name agen to me, whether you speaks for Jill, or agen Jill, it's all the same, *I'll leave yer*. I'll leave Lunnon and I'll go where you can't find me. I'll tell you a thing about Jill now, and then she'll be atween us not as ef she were dead, for we can speak of our dead, but as if she had never lived, and never died. That's how Jill is to be atween you and me, in all the days that are to come. There never *wor a Jill*. That's how things are to be. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Nat; you—you frighten me, Nat."

"Wot's a little fright to you? I'm nigh to hell with torture. Jill's broke with me. We'll never be wed, never. But that ain't the worst. The worst is there never *wor a Jill*, 'twas but a dream I 'ad. I

dreamt it all the time I were a-growing up, and all the years sence I come to manhood. And to-day I woke. There's no Jill. Do you hear me, Susy ? Do you understand ? ”

“ Yes, Nat, I try to. And there'll be no wedding, and no nice little flat, and no room for me at 'arf-a-crown a week, and the run of the kitchen thrown in ? My word, the ways of some gels is past bearing.”

“ Not another word, Susy. You know our bargain. Ef you breathe Jill's name even once again, we part, and you may take care on yourself for all I care.”

“ No, I'll not speak on her no more,” said Susy. “ You needn't pinch me so 'ard, Nat, and you needn't glare at me. I can't help it ef I don't go into big passions like other folk. I'm made quiet, and with control of my feelin's, and I don't see as I'm to be spurned for it. I'm quite willin' to drop that gel ; she worn't never a mate for you, 'cordin' to my way of thinkin'. Oh, for mercy's sake don't shake me agen, I expect my shoulders are black and blue as it is, from your pinches. Wot I want to know now is this. Are we to stay on in these loathsome rooms, or are we to move somewhere else ? You and me could take that flat in Howard's Buildings, and live there by ourselves—why not ? Oh, good gracious, wot is the matter now, Nat ? ”

“ I'm goin' out,” said Nat. “ You may expect me back when you see me, not afore.”

"Ain't you coming back to-night?"

"No!"

The door of the room was banged to with a loud report. Susy waited until Nat's footsteps ceased to sound. Then she threw herself into the nearest chair, and gave vent to a gentle sigh.

"Talk of tigresses! Why, Nat's turned into a tiger," she moaned. "Oh, my poor shoulders, how they does ache!"

The next morning Susy arrived in good time at the neat room in Westbourne Grove, where the flower girls who belonged to the Guild had the privilege of keeping their unsold flowers.

The room was arranged on the plan of a dairy, and was so thoroughly ventilated that even the flowers which were over from Saturday night were many of them still fresh and fit for sale.

Susy had bought a small supply of quite fresh flowers at Covent Garden, and she was not long in trimming up her basket and giving it a very presentable and tidy appearance. She did not possess Jill's eye for colour nor her delicate touch. Everything Susy did was commonplace, but nevertheless when she started forth on her day's work, refreshed by her good wash in the nice lavatory which adjoined the room where the flowers were stored, there was not a more presentable or trimmer-looking flower girl in London. Her fair hair was plaited up smooth and tight; the front portion of it being of course curled

into a tight fringe. She wore the neat and serviceable costume of the Guild, having left her own clothes behind her at the rooms of the Institution.

A flower girl's profits largely depend on the position where she can place her stand. These positions vary immensely in excellence, and the good ones, in the neighbourhood of railway stations, and certain street corners where the thoroughfare is large, are much prized and eagerly sought after.

Susy's stand now, close to the Marble Arch, was one of the best in London. She had her regular customers, and it was not long before her basket was cleared of its contents, and her pockets were filled with substantial coins. Having nothing further to do in the way of business, she strolled quietly home, intending to go back to Westbourne Grove later in the day to change her costume, and get possession of her clothes.

She had nearly reached the low street where she and Nat lived, when a woman sprang suddenly from the shelter of a doorway where she was leaning, and clutched her by the arm. The woman was Poll Robinson.

So marked was the change in Poll since Susy had last seen her; so strong were the marks of suffering on her face, so untidy her dress, so unkempt her black hair, that the girl did not at first recognise her.

When she did, a sensation of repulsion came over

her, and she shook Poll's big hand from her shoulder.

"Well," she said, "wot is it? I 'as got my orders to have nought to do with you and yourn. Oh, Mrs. Robinson, you 'as been drinking; I can smell the gin on your breath."

"Only a little drop, honey; the least drop—not more than two penn'orth. I 'ad a bad bout of pain, and the gin makes it easier. Susy, don't walk so fast, for the love of heaven. My breath's bitter short lately, and I can't keep up with you."

"But I said I were to have nought to do with yer; them were Nat's orders, and I s'pose I has got to obey 'em."

"Nat said you were to have nought to do with me?" said Poll. "Did Jill say that? Did she? You tell me that true."

"I can't, Mrs. Robinson. I has nothing to do with Jill, nor with you, neither. *Do* let me go. It's disgusting to smell sperits on a woman at this hour of the day."

"It's the pain, my dear; you'd take to sperits yourself ef you had my pain. And so Nat has found out! Oh, my God, and I thought to hide it from him! Oh, my God, this is bitter, bitter—this is cruel—this is too much! Oh, to think that arter all Nat has found out!"

"It's a good thing he has," said Susy, speaking at random, for she had not the least idea what Mrs.

Robinson meant. She liked, however, to show that she was quite mistress of the situation. "It's a right good thing as Nat *has* found out," she continued, "and a fine pepper he's in, I can tell yer. I never in all my days seed him in sech a taking. I shouldn't be a bit surprised ef Nat turned wicked, and he such a pattern as he allers were! There now, Mrs. Robinson, I can't be seen talking to yer any more. It's as much as my life is worth. Good arternoon to you."

Susy walked quickly away, and Poll turned down a side alley. Her sufferings and the irregular life she was now leading had weakened her, and she felt a queer trembling sensation running all over her frame.

She was accustomed to gin now, and the twopen-n'orth she had indulged in this morning had little or no effect in disturbing her equilibrium. The gin warmed her, and eased the ceaseless, gnawing pain. It was not from the effects of the gin that Mrs. Robinson was now shaking from head to foot. It was from the awful knowledge that her great sacrifice had been in vain; that she had given up Jill, and in giving her up had parted with all the sunshine, and all the love which life could offer, and yet had done it in vain.

Poll had gone away from the girl in order to save her from disgrace. She felt certain that Jill would fret for a little, that she would mourn for her and

long to have her back again ; but by-and-by Nat's love would comfort her. She would marry Nat, and they would settle down in their comfortable and respectable home together. No need to tell Nat, who was so particular and so strict in his notions, that he had married the daughter of a woman who drank. He need never know that, for Jill would not tell. The secret, the dark, terrible secret would be safely buried and Jill would have a happy life. Poll had gone away quite sure that this would be the case.

The knowledge had stayed with her during the two or three miserable days which had passed since she had left Howard's Buildings. Poll was a great deal more ill than she had any idea of. Her constant pain was caused by a terrible malady ; her fine constitution was being secretly undermined, and she was not at all fit for the hard, roaming, comfortless life to which she had voluntarily sacrificed herself.

She was in the state when she needed the tenderest care and the most loving nursing. Jill had done everything that a daughter could do for her mother's comfort ; she had given her good and nourishing meals ; she had seen that she clothed herself well and rested well ; in short, she had surrounded her with a life of comparative refinement and comfort.

Even in that life Poll could scarcely endure her own sufferings ; how much greater were they now,

when she was going through all the hardships which a roaming existence to a woman in her class meant !

She slept in a common lodging-house at night ; she ate when she was hungry ; and whenever the terrible thirst seized her she gratified it without a moment's thought of self-control.

Therefore the three days which had passed had made sad havoc in Poll ; she looked years older, her dark face had lost all its comeliness, it was drawn and haggard, and there were many white streaks in her thick raven black hair. She was going down the hill very fast, both physically and mentally. She knew it, poor soul, and yet until this moment she had never repented of the step she had taken. She had done it with her eyes open, and she said to herself morning, noon, and night,

"I ain't sorry, for I'm giving my Jill, the best gel as ever breathed, a happy life."

But now Poll's head did reel, and Poll's limbs almost refused to keep her suffering body upright. She had made her sacrifice in vain, for in some way, some extraordinary, unaccountable way, Nat had found out her secret.

Nat knew that Jill was the daughter of a woman who debased herself by drink. The knowledge had come to him, and it had all the worst effects which Poll had dreaded ; he was very angry, he was reckless in his anger.

Susy said that Nat himself would now go to the

bad. Notwithstanding, therefore, Poll's sacrifice, Jill's life would be wrecked.



[" Shall I take yer to the nearest public? "

For some little time Mrs. Robinson staggered down the ugly slum into which she had entered, then sh

ran against a wall, too dull and dazed to proceed another step. A child came up and touched her on the arm—a pinched gutter child, who looked up at her with big eyes partly of affright, partly of indifference.

“Shall I take yer to the nearest public?” she said; “do you want another drop? You’re half seas over now; mother’s orful when she’s only half seas over. You come along to the public and have another drop, and then you won’t know nothink; you’ll be all right then.”

“So you think I’m drunk?” said Poll; “no, I ain’t drunk, there’s a pain here,” pointing to her breast, “and a swimming here,” clasping her hand to her forehead; “but I ain’t took enough to make me even half seas over. You seem a good-natured sort of a gel, and maybe ef you lend me your shoulder to lean on, I’d find a copper in my pocket for yer by-and-by.”

The child’s eyes glittered when Poll spoke of a copper.

“Yer may lean on me if yer like, missis,” she said.

“I want yer to take me to a place called Howard’s Buildings, in Nettle Street,” said Poll. “I can’t see werry well for the giddiness in my head; and I can’t walk werry well, because I has a sort of a trembling all over me; but ef I may use your eyes, little gel, and ef you’ll be a crutch to me, why I’ll give yer thruppence, so there.”

"Howard's Buildings," said the child, "I never yerred tell on 'em, nor of Nettle Street neither."

"I can guide yer a bit, honey. Ef you'll tell me the names of the streets as we pass, I'm most sure to know 'em, and I can tell yer ef we're going right or wrong. You come close up to me, little gel, and let me lean on yer shoulder."

The child came up as she was told, and Poll and she began a slow pilgrimage through the slums.

Poll's head felt as giddy as ever; the pain which seemed to eat into her very life never ceased, the trembling in her legs grew greater, but still she struggled forward. As the sacrifice was in vain, and Jill was miserable without her, why she might at least go back to Howard's Buildings. This was the only coherent thought she had. She would go back to Jill; she would kiss Jill once again.

Beyond this desire she was incapable of going. If she only kept on walking, putting one trembling foot before the other, she would at last reach the Buildings, and Jill and she would meet again. It seemed to Poll that a whole lifetime had already divided her from the girl; but now if only she could walk, the dreadful separation would come to an end.

"Can't yer step out a bit faster, missis?" said the little gutter child. "You lean hard on me, and step out, missis; we won't get to them Buildings—whatever you call 'em—to-night, ef you don't step out."

"I'll try to, dearie," said Poll; "I'm werry cold though. It's late, ain't it, honey? Seems as ef the place was werry dark."

"Dark," said the child, "it's broad day; why, the sun's shining all over us. Oh, my word, I'm melting up with the heat; and you're no light weight, missis, I can tell yer."

"Let me grip hold on yer 'and," said Poll. "What street are we in now?"

"What street?" laughed the child; "why we're in the street as we started in; we ain't gone the length of Sulphur Row."

"Oh, my God!" said Poll, "I thought as we were hours walking, and that the night had come; you must let me lean up against somethink, for I can't see."

"My thruppence first," said the child.

Poll tried to fumble in her pocket; a waggon was heard lumbering down the street behind them. The driver shouted to the child and woman to get out of the way.

"Oh, missis, come, come!" screamed the little girl; "you're standing in the road—you'll be run over—let me pull yer on the path leastways."

Poll with a great effort staggered forward. The waggon rushed by, almost grazing her feet.

The next instant the poor creature lay prone on the pavement, all consciousness having left her. The child uttered a cry and the usual crowd collected round the prostrate woman.

Two or three policemen came up and examined her.

"Drunk," said one of them impressively.

"No, she ain't," said the child ; " I asked her that and she said no, she worn't a bit drunk ; she had an orful pain and wor werry giddy, and werry trembling in the limbs, but it worn't drink, I tell yer. She spoke real sensible. I know 'em when they drinks, and that worn't what ailed her. She wanted me to take her to some Buildings or t'other, and she promised me thruppence. Do you think as I might take it out of her pocket ? "

"No, no ; get out of this, you little varmint," said the police. They examined Poll more critically, and finally decided to take her on a shutter to the nearest hospital : this happened to be St. Bartholomew's.





CHAPTER XIV.



NOTWITHSTANDING the uses of adversity, it is astonishing how well prosperity agrees with some people. It has much the same sort of effect on them that the sun has on fruit and flowers.

All the graces within them which have been invisible while the rough winds of adversity blew, now blossom, and show sweet bits of colour, and little tender, gracious perfumes, which no one would have supposed consistent with such hard, crabbed, in short, disagreeable products of nature.

Silas Lynn had all through his life, up to the present day, been visited by the harsh winds of adversity.

It is true they had not come to him in the form of poverty. He was too prudent, too hard-working for poverty to have anything to do with him. But a man can suffer adversity without being poor, and

Silas's life from his cradle up to the present had been a hard one.

Pleasure and he had kept at a distance. The relaxations of existence had never been permitted to him. In short, his life had been all lessons and no play.

Silas was aware of this fact himself, but up to the present he had looked upon it as a good and healthy sign of his soul's state. His mother had taught him that chastening is the lot of the Christian.

"Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth," she had said to him so many times, that he whispered it to himself with white lips and a haggard look on his strong face as he bent over her in her coffin.

When his fruit crop failed, and his flowers yielded but poor blooms, he repeated the old text again under his breath, and took comfort from it.

It was a great surprise, therefore, to Silas, when suddenly the old aspect of things altered, and the Lord whom he sincerely loved ceased to chasten. Life was so completely changed to Silas that he scarcely knew himself.

He was going to be married. There was nothing remarkable in the fact in itself—more than one middle-aged woman of the Wesleyan community in his own village would gladly have come to keep house for him. She would, as the expression goes, "make him and mend him." She would cook for him, and keep his place clean, and spend his money,

and be the mother of his children, whom she would bring up in the fear of the Lord.

Silas could have married Eliza Sparkes, or Mary Ann Hatton, or Hannah Martin, and he would have received the congratulations of his friends, and the sincerest good wishes from all quarters, and yet not have been able consciously to say in his heart, "The Lord has ceased to chasten."

But he was not going to marry a middle-aged woman from the village. He was middle-aged himself, no doubt, nearly forty, but the bride who was soon coming to gladden the old cottage, and vie with the flowers in her beauty, was scarcely more than a child in years.

This wilful, pretty, dainty blossom which he had culled out of the London streets was just the very last wife any one would have expected him to take. She would not be to the taste of the Wesleyans, and he felt that the congratulations and "God speed you" from his friends would be few.

But what mattered these things, when his own heart was singing a psalm of thanksgiving from morning till night, when the flowers in his garden were absolutely riotous in the profusion of their blossoms, when the sun smiled on him, and the dews came at night to refresh him? What did he care for the neighbours, whether they were pleased or not?

During the first fortnight of his engagement to

Jill, his own nature took a sudden late blossoming. His gruff voice became a shade lower and more refined



“ Wot’s this I lear, Silas? that you’re going to contract marriage
with an unbeliever? ”

in tone, and even Jonathan, his hard-working factotum, ceased to fear Silas.

Master and man were very busy, putting the tiny cottage in order, for the wedding was to be in another week.

On a certain Saturday evening, as Silas was standing in the middle of his flower-beds, contemplating a late crop of enormous carnations, and considering how many boxes he could fill with cut blooms for his Monday's market, he heard the click of the gate at the far end of the garden path, and saw an elderly woman in a poke bonnet and long cloak advancing to meet him.

"Giminy! ef it ain't Aunt Hannah!" he muttered under his breath. "Now, whatever's bringing her bothering round?"

He walked down the path as he spoke, and held out his big hand to his relation.

"Wot's this I hear, Silas?" said his aunt; "that you're going to contract marriage with an unbeliever?"

The little woman had an anxious, wizened face. It was raised now with a world of commiseration in it to Silas.

The man felt so happy that he absolutely smiled down at the audacious little intruder.

"That's all you know," he began.

"Oh, don't I know, Silas! Wot would yer pore mother say ef she were to come alive again, and see this bitter day? Oh, Silas! you that has been brought up on the Bible—han't you read your Scriptor to

some purpose? 'Favour is deceitful and beauty is vain.' Oh, Silas! Silas! it's Mary Ann Hatton, or one of them other sober women you ought to be taking to wife."

"Yes," said Silas, "and wouldn't both on us have been as cross as two sticks? I'm taking a bonny bit of a gel to wed, wot's sweet as a rose to look at, and with a perfume o' the lavender and the cherry-pie about her. Good inside and out is Jill, and I guess ef Solomon were alive, he'd say as the price of a gel like Jill were above rubies."

"I heerd tell," said Aunt Hannah, in a slow voice, "that you was quite gone off yer head, Silas, my man, but I didn't go to believe it, until I had clapped my own two eyes on yer. I'm mournful, thinkin' on yer pore mother. But there's no manner of use in wasting words on a man wot's gone silly, so I'll wish yer a werry good-evening."

"You stay a bit," said Silas. "Jonathan and me, we are doing up the cottage, and you had ever a cute eye for a good bit of furniture. Come and see what I am doing. I doubt ef you'd know the place."

With many sighs and groans, Aunt Hannah was induced to enter the cottage. She behaved in a melancholy way when she got inside, for the sight of her sister's vacant chair provoked a sudden flood of tears, which embarrassed and annoyed Silas.

"Eh dear, eh dear," she sobbed, "to think of the last time I ha' seen pore Maria a-bolstered up in that

cheer. She had the asthmey awful, and she said to me, 'Hannah, it ketches me most when I lies down.' She said them words over and over, and I don't think I ever heerd anything more mournful. Eh, and ef that ain't the lavender I see'd her put in with her own hands into that identical muslin bag, my name ain't Hannah Royal! Oh, Silas! it's wonderful how you can go agin a mother like that!"

"I ain't agoing agin her," said Silas; "you shet up now, Aunt Hannah, you has said enough. Wot do you think of this table and chair as I has bought? And this rug to put in front of the stove? Come now, give us your opinion; it's worth having."

Thus appealed to Aunt Hannah immediately wiped her tears, and going down on her knees began to feel the texture of the rug, and to put it up to her nose, and to sniff at it, and then hold it between herself and the light.

"I misdoubt me that it ain't made with three threads across," she said, laying it down with some contempt. "And the colour's too flashy for my taste. I like a drab ground, with a teeny sprig of purple on it. Let me look at that 'ere table. You don't mean to tell me, Silas, as you has gone and bought a *meehogany* table? Don't yer know as sech a table is sinful waste to a man in your station?"

"It were goin' dirt cheap," said Silas, in an apologetic tone.

"I misdoubt me that it's worm-eat," said Aunt Hannah. "And as to this cheer, its creak would turn a body silly. Well, is there anything else for me to see?"

"There's a crate in that corner, full of cups and saucers, and plates and dishes."

"Chaney?" said Aunt Hannah, "I'm a jedge of that. I'll unpack the crate ef you wish, Silas."

"Well, do," said Silas, "I'll be obleeged. I can manage flowers, but I'ates touching chaney. It seems to slip out of yer fingers, however careful you air. You unpack the crate, missis, and we'll have a cup of tea together."

Silas proceeded to light the fire, and put the kettle on to boil, and Aunt Hannah unpacked the crate which contained the cups and saucers, and plates, and dishes, with which Jill was to help to furnish her new home.

If there were one thing more than another for which Mrs. Royal had a truly worldly affection, it was for "chaney." She was a good judge of all house furniture, but with regard to "chaney" she felt herself a specialist. She was as knowing on this point as Silas was with regard to the best blooms and the choicest cuttings. The task, therefore, to which she now set herself was quite to her mind.

Silas had not dared to choose the tea service and the plates and dishes himself—he had asked a friend of his to buy them for him, and to have them sent

down to the cottage. When Aunt Hannah, therefore, removed the paper wrapper from a delicate cup of white and gilt, with a blue convolvulus lying across the saucer, and sending its delicate tendrils round the cup, he came and gazed at the lovely specimens with a certain quickening of his pulses, and a queer inclination in his eyes to water.

"I say!" he exclaimed, "I never thought as chaney would look like that."

"It's most *onsuitable*," said Aunt Hannah. "But I don't deny as it's neat. My word, I only hope as that gel will have deft fingers, or she'll be crackin' and splittin' this yere fragile chaney. You don't mean to say, Silas, as you'll use it hevery day? You are sinnin' a'most past knowin' you, but I don't s'pose as you'll go the awful depths of using this yere chaney hevery day."

"That must be as Jill pleases," said Silas. "Giminy! I never did know as chaney could look like this, it seems to add a fresh pleasure to life—why, it a'most beats the flowers."

"I won't deny that it ain't a werry neat pattern," said Aunt Hannah, "the twist of convolvuly is werry cunnin', but chaney like that is meant to lock up in a cupboard; there ain't no one as 'ud use it daily."

"Look here," said Silas, "there's a power of cups and saucers, ain't there, Aunt Hannah?"

"My word, yes," said Aunt Hannah, "a whole,

dozen, and plates to match, and four fruit dishes, and a couple of cake plates, and a slop-bowl and a teapot, and a cream jug and sugar basin—it's the most complete thing I iver seed."

"Well, then, look yere," said Silas, "s'pose as we has a tea-drinkin' out o' it."

"Silas!" Aunt Hannah dropped her lower jaw and her small eyes grew beady bright in their glance.

"S'pose," continued Silas, "we had a tea-drinkin' out of it, and we asked Jill down, and one or two o' the neighbours to meet her, and you come and spend the night here, Aunt Hannah, and you undertake the tea-drinkin'—s'pose now you do that, eh?"

"Well," said Aunt Hannah, "it seems like encouraging of you, Silas, in your mad folly."

"Not a bit on it," said Lynn, "for whether you come or whether you go, Jill and me we'll be married at the church in the village come next Thursday. You can please yerself, Aunt Hannah, but I thought as we might have our tea-drinkin' on Tuesday, and you'd see with your own eyes, and the neighbours 'ud see, what sort of a little gel were coming home to me to cheer up my life."

"Well," said Aunt Hannah, "I don't go fer to deny that there's something in your idee, Silas. I own as I'd like to say a word to that gel on the subject of chaney like this. Ef I found her teachable and humble in her notions, I don't *promise*, mind, but I *might* give her three cracked delf cups of my

own—white they was once, but they has turned yellor—she could use 'em for common and keep this chaney for best, for christenings, and sech-like, and the delf cups 'ud be a very suitable present from your aunt to her, Silas."

"You can do that as you please," said Silas. "Air we to have the tea-drinkin', or air we not, Aunt Hannah?"

"I think, hall things considerin', that it 'ud be right to have it," said Aunt Hannah, in a solemn voice. "In a matter o' this sort it's right to consider the waluables, and this chaney is altogether out of the common. The first thing to be done is to scald it, and that I'll manage for yer on Monday morning, Silas, for I'll bring over my own wooden pail, and gradually heat each cup and each saucer in hot water, until it'll bear the heat when it comes to the bile. It's wonderful careless of gels in these days, they'll crack the finest chaney for not knowing how properly to scald it afore usin'."

"That's settled then," said Silas. "I'll speak to Jill to-morrow, and we'll ask Mr. Hibberty Jones and his wife, and Mary Ann Hatton to come to tea, and ef Mr. Peters 'ud honour us as well we'd be proud to see him. You'll see to the victuals, won't you, Aunt Hannah?"

"Yes, you leave that to me," said Aunt Hannah. "That girl 'ull eat a cake worth eating for the first time in *her* life—and now I must be goin' 'ome."



CHAPTER XV.



ILL was quite willing to accompany Silas home for the tea-drinking. He told her about it on Sunday when he went to see her in her little flat.

“Yer to come down looking as peart as you can, Jill,” he said to her. “The folks in Newbridge beats all folks livin’ for contrariness. They think that God Almighty did right when He made a lovely flower, and mortal wrong when He made a lovely woman. They think as sweetness and beauty can go together in flowers but not in gels, so I want you to look your werry best, my dainty little cuttin’, and show ’em as they are all hout for once in their reckonin’s. I’m thinkin’ as maybe yer would like a new bit of a gownd ; what do yer say to a yaller cotton now, made werry stylish ? I don’t mind paying a real good dressmaker to put it together. Come, now, would you like it, eh ?”

"No, thank you, Silas," said Jill. "I'll feel more at home like in my old black gownd, which has in a sort of a way growed to me. I'd like best to wear that with a bit of a posy that you'll pick out of the garden fresh for me when I get down."

"You're to stay for the night, mind, when you do come," said Silas. "An aunt o' mine, a Mrs. Royal, a werry decent body, can share my bed with yer, and I'll go and have a shake-down at Peters's. You'll be sure to come in good time, and a-lookin' yer best, Jill."

"Yes, Silas," she replied, with a meekness which would have puzzled him very much had he known her better. He was too happy and content, however, for even the faintest suspicion of anything not **being** quite right to enter his mind.

Jill Robinson was like the mignonette and the lavender and the cherry-pie for sweetness of character, while she resembled the crimson rosebud in the richness of her beauty.

Yes, surely the Lord had given up chastening Silas when so great a prize as Jill was to be his.

The invited guests were only too eager to come to the tea-drinking. Notwithstanding the disapproval of the congregation at Silas's choice, those of them who were favoured with an invitation to see his bride were by no means slow of availing themselves of it.

Mrs. Hibberty Jones and Miss Mary Ann Hatton

went, it is true, under a protest, but Hibberty Jones himself and Peters owned that they did not object to seeing beauty when they could do so in a good cause. It was distinctly to Silas's advantage that the foremost members of the congregation should support him at this critical juncture, and if possible take early steps to convert Jill to her future husband's faith. So, dressed in their best, the homely village folk walked across the fields, on this lovely summer's evening, to Silas Lynn's tea-drinking.

Silas had ordered a new suit of strong rough frieze for his wedding. The suit had been made in a great hurry by the village tailor, and was sombre both in its cut and its colour. But the gloomy effect of coat and trousers was much relieved by a gay waistcoat of white with a coloured sprig bedecking it all over. This waistcoat had belonged to Silas's father, and was regarded in the family as a very precious heirloom. He wore in his button-hole three large crimson carnations, and altogether made an imposing spectacle as he stood in the porch of the little cottage to receive his visitors.

Aunt Hannah was busy inside the house. She wore a dark plum-coloured dress, and a little tight black net cap, tied under her chin with a bow of yellow ribbon.

Jill had not yet arrived, and Silas, while he held out his great hands in hearty greeting to his visitors, could not help letting his eyes wander anxiously up

the path which led from the railway station direct to the cottage.

"How do you do, Mr. Lynn?" said Miss Mary Ann Hatton in an acrid voice. "Allow me to congratulate you. Oh, pray don't let us keep your hattention. Where the heyes stray is where the 'eart is to be found. Ain't that so, Mrs. Jones?"

"It ain't modest to speak o' them sort of things aloud," said Mrs. Jones, in a hushed voice to the spinster. "Don't let yer feelin's get the better of yer, Mary Ann—you're disappointed, but keep it dark, for the sake of feminine modesty. Well, Mr. Lynn, we're proud to come and meet this young gel what is soon to be yer wife. Have she come yet? Or are you looking for 'er over the brow of the 'ill, that you keep your eye fixed on that one pint so constant?"

"She ain't come, but I'm expectin' of her every minute," said Silas. "I'm real proud to welcome yer, neighbours. Come in, come in. My aunt, Mrs. Royal, is in the house a-brewing the tea. Come in, neighbours, and make yerselves at home."

Mr. and Mrs. Hibberty Jones and Miss Hatton stepped immediately across the theshold, but old Mr. Peters stood still, and put one of his wrinkled hands, with marked solemnity, on Silas Lynn's shoulder.

"Wanity of wanity, Silas," he said in a mournful tone. "I didn't think as you'd have been tuk in by a bit of a gel to the extent of wearin' a flowered waist-coat. You has had a sudden fall, Silas."

"Go right into the house, Mr. Peters," said Silas. "There Jill a-coming down the field. You look at her, and tell me arterwards ef you think she wor worthy of a sprigged waistcoat or not."

When Jill and Silas entered the little cottage side by side, the rest of the visitors were seated in some impatience round the tea-table. The board was well supplied with a large brown cake in the centre, a freshly cooked ham at one end, and the tea equipage, containing the delicate white and gold tea-service, at the other. Bread in great junks, hot cake, butter in several fancy devices, and a large dish of honey completed the repast.

Hiberty Jones had placed himself as near that end of the table where the ham stood as possible. Miss Hatton sat pensively where she could keep control of the honey, and Mrs. Hiberty Jones made up her mind that she would act as cutter of the cake.

When Silas and Jill entered the whole company arose, and each in turn offered a cold handshake to the London flower girl. Room was made for her to sit down beside Silas at the end of the board, and Aunt Hannah, with a loud "a-hem," lifted the tea-pot to dispense the tea.

"May I ask, Mrs. Jones," she inquired, "'ow you like your tea sarved, or ef you has no wishes on the subjec'? Some folk ain't particular, but it's best to know."

"I ain't what's called particular," said Mrs. Jones.

"No honey, I thank you, Miss Hatton—but I likes my tea to lay for a good eight or ten minutes arter it is made. I will own that I likes it bitter; flavoured with one spoonful of thick rich cream and three good lumps of castor sugar. Jones goes in for four lumps, but I say so much sugar is apt to lay heavy, so three's my quantity. I'll trouble you not to give me more than one teaspoonful of cream, Mrs. Royal."

"Sech strong tea is wonderful bad for the narves," said Miss Hatton. "May I ask, miss," turning to Jill, "'ow you takes it in the City? I'm told, but I don't know ef it's true, that you mostly uses *our* tea-leaves over agen."

"I don't think it's true," replied Jill, "though maybe there air some folks poor enough even for that." She raised her great dark eyes as she spoke, and looked sadly at Miss Hatton.

The spinster turned away with a toss of her head.

"Why, she's foreign," she muttered. "It's worse even than I feared."

"I have no doubt, miss, whatever, that *you* always drinks the best o' tea," said Hibberty Jones with a gallant bow. "So purty a bit of a young gel couldn't but have the werry best."

"Quite so—I agrees with you, Mr. Jones," said Mr. Peters.

The women could not forbear snorting audibly, and Miss Hatton in her agitation dropped a spoonful of honey on the white cloth, and the next moment one

of the delicate white saucers with the convolvulus lying across its smooth surface had been pushed by her awkward elbow on to the floor. It lay there in shivers. Aunt Hannah gave an unearthly groan, and Silas felt the purple colour of rage dyeing his face.

"Don't say a word, Silas," said Jill in a soft tone.

She sprang lightly to her feet, ran round to Miss Hatton's side, picked up the broken crockery, which she put out of sight, placed another saucer beside Miss Hatton's plate, and returned to her place by Silas.

Her little action was so swift and graceful, and the lovely colour which mantled her cheeks was so becoming, that the three men could not help expressing their approval by a low sort of underground cheer.

"You have a kind heart, I see, my lass," said old Peters; "a kind heart as well as a purty face. I never knew 'em go together afore. I divided the world o' women afore into two lots. There was the illigant faymales, with their fine faces, and their fine walk, and their fine bits o' ways; and there was the plain, down-right women, like my old missis, wot died, and like our good friend, Mrs. Hibberty Jones" (Mrs. Hibberty Jones turned white with suppressed anger at this marked allusion to her present appearance), "and like Miss Hatton," continued Peters, "sterling bodies both o' them, but awk'ard outside. We must own as plain women is awk'ard outside.

Well, I thought as the plain 'uns were the good 'uns, and the purty 'uns the bad 'uns. Never thought as they'd get mixed; never did, never. But the ways of the Lord are wonderful, and I can't but b'lieve that there's a purty nature inside that bonny face o' yourn, my gel."

Jill received old Mr. Peters's rather embarrassing compliments with a calm indifference that greatly amazed the three other women present.

"I don't think nobody ought to think o' looks one way or t'other," she said, after a pause. "We're as we're made—it's the inside as is everything. I never know'd kind, rich, grand sort of folks like these here afore. I wor brought up rough, although I don't like roughness; and some o' the people I has met were real ugly in feature, but oh, the 'earts in 'em—the kindness o' em—the beautiful look as love had put in their eyes. I don't think the looks matters at all, it's the 'earts as is everything."

Jill looked so sweet when she said this that even the angry women were appeased, and Miss Hatton, suddenly moving her chair, made room for Jill to sit opposite the honey.

"You come nigh to me," she said; "I own as I'm awk'ard, and I'm sorry I broke a bit of your chaney."

"Go and set near her, Jill," whispered Silas; "your winnin' of 'em all, my little cuttin'; I knew as yer would."

"Jill," said Aunt Hannah, "I 'ope as you're a gel

as is willin' to hact up to your own words. I will say as you looks well-meaning. It worn't your fault as you were made handsome—it's a trial, I will own; but you must try and take it patient. But what I wants to know is this—'ave you or 'ave you not got a light hand with chaney? Chaney is more delicate nor a woman; it has, so to speak, no constitootion. Any minute, by a rough knock or a push, or the awk'ardness jest now shown by Mary Ann Hatton, and there—it'll go, shivered. The gel what can manage chaney has something to be proud on. When I was married I got a tea-sarvice of white chaney with a gold rim, and a scalloped edge round the saucer. It wor werry neat, but not a patch on this, for this blue convolvuly is too cunnin' for anything. Well, when you come to see me, Jill, I'll show you my chaney, every piece complete, not a crack in it, nor a chip; all the little cups, and the scalloped saucers and the plates, jest as I got 'em when I wor married. Why wor this? I'll tell you why. I put 'em in a glass cupboard, and I never used 'em 'cept at christenings. Ef you keep this chaney for christenings why it'll last, Jill, but ef you uses it every day, it stands to reason as the constitootions of these cups and saucers 'll give way. I ask yer now, in the presence of yer future husband, Mr. Peters, Mr. Hibberty Jones, the good wife of the latter, and Miss Mary Ann Hatton, what is yer intentions with regard to this beautiful chaney?"

"How can she tell jest now, Aunt Hannah?" said Silas.

"In the matter of wedding the gel I leave everything to you, Silas," remarked his aunt, "but in the cause of the chaney I must speak my mind. Consider this question, my gel, and hanswer me true."

There was a dead pause when Aunt Hannah came to the end of her oration. The other women, and even the men, looked at Jill with some small anxiety. She was quite silent for a moment, looking down at the delicate little cup and saucer which stood by her plate.

"I think," she said, after a minute's silence, "that we might have a little cupboard made for this yere chaney, Silas. The cupboard could face the door and the two windows, and when the sun come in it 'ud shine on the cups and saucers and make 'em look real fine, and when Aunt Hannah came to see us we could use the chaney. I has got some cups and saucers at home as 'ud do for you and me every day, Silas."

"My gel," said Aunt Hannah, "come here and kiss me. Silas, I withdraw all my hopposition to yer wedding this gel; the Lord has seen fit to give her a mind to match her face. She spoke now with rare wisdom, and my own three delf cups as I spoke on to yer last week, I'll give to this gel as a wedding present."



CHAPTER XVI.



HE tea-drinking having turned out such a success, Silas went down to the village to spend the night with old Peters in a state of rare exultation.

"I wor right, yer see," he said. "I know'd what I were about when I asked that yere little cutting to come and strike root in my garden."

"She's a werry purty creter," said old Peters. "I don't go for to deny it, Silas, she's rare and purty. But what ails her, man? Do yer think as she has given yer her young affection; you ain't so young, Silas, and you ain't to say 'ansome; do yer think that gracious, purty girl gives back love for your love, Silas?"

Silas felt as if a dash of ice-cold water had been thrown over his warm, glowing, happy heart.

"What can a gel do more nor say 'yes?'" he remarked after a pause.

"I'm not so sure on that," replied Peters. "Gels say 'yes' for lots o' motives—the wish for a home, maybe; oh, lots o' motives. I'd have said that a young thing like Jill 'ud choose for her mate a lad with good looks hisself, and youth; that's what I'd have said from my experience of the faymale 'eart; but there, Silas, don't take on, man, I wor wrong about beauty and goodness goin' together, so maybe I'm wrong 'bout the t'other also. I can see that the gel has a great kindness for yer, Silas; but love, that's quite another matter. What ails her eyes for instance? what's back o' them looking out at us all so gloomy-like? My word, them eyes haunts me; seems as ef a sperit was looking through 'em, werry patient, werry sad. I could cry when I thinks on 'em. What's the matter, Silas? What ails yer, man?"

"You don't s'pose as talk like yourn is pleasant to listen to," replied Silas; "and you're all wrong 'bout Jill not wanting to have me. Why, I'll prove it to yer now as yer wrong. I asked her to be my wife one morning at the market, and I suppose she felt skir't like, for she looked at me with her face as rosy as the day, and her eyes like great, deep wells, with the wonder that filled 'em, and she said, 'No, no, Mr. Lynn, it can't be'; and she up with her basket and away she runned. Well, of course I said to myself, there's an end o' this; but, what do yer think, neighbour? The next morning early, soon arter daybreak,

who should come down all the way from Lunnon to see me but this same little gel ; she knocked at my door and called out to me to open to her ; and when I come it wor, ' Yes, yes, Mr. Lynn, I will marry yer ef you'll have me.' Worn't that pretty good proof of her loving me, eh, Peters ? "

" I don't deny as it wor," said Peters.

Silas and Peters entered the small cottage of the latter, and, as Silas had to go to town in a couple of hours, they immediately parted for the night, Silas declining to go to bed, but declaring he could take a good sleep in Peters's deep arm-chair.

Just before they said good-night the old man made a request.

" Ef yer has time, Silas," he said, " I'd be much obleeged to yer if yer could call round to St. Bartholomy's Hospital and leave this little parcel for my sister, Rachel Riggs. It's a wool shawl of hers, as she allers sets store on, and I had a card from her to say as she wor better, and wanted her shawl. You'd obleege me greatly, Silas, ef you could leave it."

" Put it on the table there," said Silas, " and I won't forget."

The old man went off to his own room, and Silas sat in the deep arm-chair and looked out at the summer night. There was nothing really to trouble him in the words that Peters had said, nevertheless they kept coming back in a teasing and irritating fashion.

It was Peters's opinion that Jill did not love him. What folly! If ever a girl had gone out of her way to show that she loved a man, it was Jill. As to her face being somewhat pale, and as to the fact that her dark eyes were sad in their expression, was not that always the case? Had not Silas, who knew her so much better than Peters, always noticed that latent sadness in her charming face. He loved her all the better for it.

"It's jest her kind heart," he murmured; "it's jest as there is trouble in the world, and she can't help noticin' of it. Why, see her to-night, when Mary Ann Hatton dropped the chaney saucer. Even that were too much for my Jill. Oh, yes, Peters is quite mistook. Jill loves me, for sure, and I'm jest the werry happiest feller in the wide world."

Silas, however, notwithstanding these soothing reflections, felt too excited to sleep. He was glad when the first faint brightness in the east told him that the time had come for him to rise and begin his long day's work.

He softly left the cottage, and, going across the fields to his own small homestead, put the horses to the already carefully-packed waggon. Then going round to the cottage-door, he tapped with his knuckles at the window of the little bedroom where Aunt Hannah and Jill were sleeping. Jill was to accompany Silas back to town. She was dressed, and came out to him at once. Her face looked

almost bright this morning ; she had a faint colour in her cheeks, which was further deepened by the bright shawl which she wore round her head. When she came up to Silas and slipped her little brown hand into his, he instantly felt through his whole being that a glorious sun had arisen over the earth, and that old Timothy Peters must be fast approaching idiocy.

"Come, Jill," he exclaimed, "we'll have a jolly ride into town. Why, yer ain't cold, be yer, my dear?"

"No, Silas."

"Only I thought I see'd yer shiver. It'll be werry hot by-and-by, but ef yer finds this hour of the morning chill, I'll fetch out my sheep's-skin rug to wrap yer up in."

"No, no, Silas, I ain't really cold. Let's start at once, and maybe when we gets to the brow of the hill we'll see the sun rise. I has been up early enough most days o' my life, but I never seed the sun rise for all that."

"It's a sight to remember," said Lynn. "Come along then, my choice little cuttin', and we'll get under weigh."

As a rule, Silas was a very taciturn man ; but on this particular morning it was he who did most of the talking.

"Eh, Jill," he said once, as they approached London, "to think as you and me 'ull be husband

and wife to-morrow. The delight o' it is a'most past belief. When I thinks on you as keeping the cottage bright, and cooking my meals for me, and watching as nobody comes and picks off the best blooms when I'm away at the market, I can scarce contain myself. I don't believe in all the wide world there'll be a happier pair nor you and me, Jill, for all that I am eight-and-thirty and you not seventeen yet."

"I hope as I'll make yer a good wife, Silas," replied Jill.

"Oh, there ain't no doubt on that, my little cuttin'. There's that in you, Jill, that can't help being good to folk. Lor, I could shout with larfin' when I think how you twisted all them crabbed folk round yer little finger last night. Jest a glint o' your eyes and a soft word or two and 'twor done. Even Mary Ann Hatton couldn't stan' out agen yer. But, Jill, I'm a-thinking that yer mother and yer two brothers ought to be asked proper to our wedding. Yer mother is as fine a figure of a woman as I know; and, though I don't know what yer brothers are like, and I make no doubt they're mischeevous little varmint as is to be found in the world, yet still wot's yours is mine, Jill, and I'll make them all free and welcome to come to the wedding to-morrow. Wot's the matter, my dear? Why don't yer speak?"

"There ain't nothing the matter, Silas. Seems to me lately as ef I had very few words of any sort to say. I'm obleeged to yer, Silas, for your kind

thought about my folk, and I'd be right glad to have them with me when I'm wed; but I han't seen the boys for nearly three weeks. I'm thinking maybe they has run off to sea. Tom were always minded that way."

"Well," said Silas, "they might do worse. The sea is not so bad a life ef a lad is strong, and ef he don't take up with bad ways. But 'bout yer mother, Jill? It's werry odd as I han't laid eyes on her sence you and me made up our minds to get spliced."

"Mother ain't werry well," said Jill, "and——" but here her voice failed her; she covered her face with her trembling hand, and burst into an agony of tears.

Silas, in his absolute amazement, pulled up the horses, and, looking round at the weeping girl, surveyed her from head to foot with a sudden shy terror, which gave a ludicrous expression to his plain face.

"Wot is it, Jill? Wot is it?" at last he gasped.

"Nothing, Silas, nothing," she replied, checking her tears with a violent effort. "It were real wrong of me to give way, and you so good. But I'm troubled 'bout mother, orful, bitter troubled. She ain't well, and I'm troubled 'bout her. Seems as ef I couldn't speak on her lately. She won't come to the weddin', Silas, and you mustn't ask me no questions 'bout the why and the wherefore. Maybe, arter we're wed I'll tell yer, but not now, dear Silas."

"Well, it's you I'm goin' to wed," said Silas, "and ef you're there, no matter about t'other folks, say I. Only I'm sorry you're in trouble 'bout anything, my own little gel, and I only wish I could comfort you."

"You do, Silas, you do."

"Well, them's good words to hear. We're at the market now, Jill; but as you ain't going to sell flowers to-day, maybe you'd like to be gwine home. Next time we meets it'll be till death us do part."

When Silas said these words Jill felt a sick agony creeping over her. They were the words she had longed to hear said over her and Nat. She turned her white face away, and, quickly leaving the market, ran home to Howard's Buildings as fast as her feet could carry her. Silas, in excellent spirits, began to attend to his plants, flowers, and fruit. Any slight remaining uneasiness which might have lingered in his mind after old Peters's words was now removed. Of course Jill loved him, but her pallor and the sad expression in her eyes were both accounted for by some secret sorrow in connection with her mother. Silas determined to get at this grief, and if possible to remove it after he and Jill were married. He was too busy to-day, however, to give it any further thought; he had not only to attend to his many customers, but he had to make arrangements for the two or three days' holiday he meant to give himself after his wedding. He had to attend to a list of

orders which Aunt Hannah had provided him with for the wedding feast ; and last, but not least, he must manage to call at St. Bartholomew's Hospital with the little shawl for old Peters's sister, Rachel Riggs. Silas knew Mrs. Riggs, and with all those new qualities which the sunshine of prosperity had awakened into being, it occurred to him that it would give her pleasure if a bunch of flowers accompanied the shawl. Silas would never have thought of giving Mrs. Riggs flowers in the old days, but he did many things now which astonished himself.

When his business at Covent Garden was ended, he selected a large bunch of some of his commoner flowers, and started off to walk to the hospital. He had gone nearly half-way when it suddenly entered into his head that it would largely add to Peters's happiness, if he, Silas, could contrive to see Mrs. Riggs for a moment or two. He knew enough about hospitals to be aware that he would not be admitted until the afternoon, so, leaving his flowers at the shop of a friend, he got through his other work, and finally arrived at St. Bartholomew's on the stroke of two o'clock, the earliest hour when visitors are admitted.

Silas was taken at once to the women's ward, where Mrs. Riggs was sitting up in her clean bed with a "nightingale" round her shoulders. Her wizened old face was lit up with a curious mixture of surprise, pleasure, and alarm when she saw Silas coming

gingerly on tiptoe down the long ward to see her. Her remembrance of Silas in the past was not a pleasant one—he was morose, intensely rough and disagreeable—a very upright man, of course, but the last to put himself out of the way to do a neighbour a kindness. It was astonishing, therefore, to see him with a little brown paper parcel in one hand and an enormous bouquet of flowers in the other advancing to meet her. Silas's rough face, too, was all aglow, his coarse mouth was wreathed in smiles, his little ferrity, deep-set eyes were the windows through which a happy soul looked.

Mrs. Riggs said, "My sakes alive ! wot's come to the man ?" under her breath. She stretched out her thin, old hand, which Silas clasped, and then, sitting down by her, he began to chat about the small doings of Newbridge and its inhabitants.

Peters's cough was certainly better, the Hibberty Joneses were in good case, Mary Ann Hatton looked quite fine for her. In short, the village was enjoying a heyday of prosperity, and Silas felt sure that they would all give Mrs. Riggs a hearty welcome when she returned. He knew that the old woman was regarding him with a sharp stare of curiosity ; he was well aware that she was amazed at the change in him, but he did not feel inclined to betray his happy secret. There was a new sweet shyness about him when he thought of Jill and the great, tender love he bore her.

He had bid Mrs. Riggs good-bye and was leaving the ward, when a full voice, rich in tone although somewhat weakened by recent illness, was heard pronouncing his name.

A woman who was lying stretched out flat in a bed at the far end of the ward was calling to him. Her voice had a piteous ring in it ; her black eyes were fixed on him with a world of entreaty in their glance.

"Come yere, Mr. Lynn, for the love o' heaven, come yere," said the voice.

Lynn looked up the ward and immediately recognised Poll Robinson. His heart gave a heavy thump ; he was conscious of a sudden weight of apprehension on him, and then, still walking on tiptoe, he marched up the ward and stood by the sick woman's side.

"Well, I'm blessed," he exclaimed, looking down at her. "So you're here, and that's the secret wot's troubling Jill."

"Oh, Mr. Lynn, ha' you seen my gel?" exclaimed Poll. "Oh, you don't know the awful 'eart hunger as is over me, never to see her or to hear of her. Oh, Mr. Lynn, when I seed you a-coming in, I thought as you wor, may be, an angel fro' heaven. I said to myself, maybe Jill has been a-buying flowers from Silas Lynn. Oh, my gel, my sweet, sweet gel. Ha' you seen her, Mr. Lynn?"

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Robinson," said Silas. "Make

your mind heasy. Jill's all right. Why I seen her this werry morning."

"Oh, and is she well ; do she look happy ?"

"She ought to look well, and she ought to be happy. It'll be her wedding day to-morrow. Ef a gel don't look happy on the eve of her wedding day, why she never will, accordin' to my thinkin'."

"Oh, praise the Lord," said Poll, "then I ain't done the mischief I thought. I wor mortal feared as she had broke off with Nat Carter, but ef they're to be married to-morrow why it's all right, and I ain't done the mischief I thought."

"Who did yer say as she were to marry?" asked Silas in a queer, thick, husky voice. "Wot name did yer say, Nat—Nat Carter?"

"Yes, yes; you must know him for sure—that 'ansome young costermonger as allers goes in good time to the market. You must mind him, Mr. Lynn, a tall, well-set-up lad, with blue eyes and as fair as Jill's dark. Why they has loved each other, them two, ever since my Jill were a little dot at school. Never seen anything like the way they took on one for t'other. Wot's the matter, Mr. Lynn? You must know o' this, surely."

"Yes, of course," said Lynn; he made a supreme effort to control himself and sat down on the chair by Poll's bedside.

"You must know Nat Carter," she continued, fixing her anxious eyes on him.

"Yes, yes, for sure."

"It is an awful load off my mind, Silas Lynn, that they'll be married to-morrow. Mayhap you'll be at the weddin'."

"Not likely," growled Silas.

"Well, well ; you look pinched somehow in the face, neighbour. I wouldn't be surprised if Jill wor glad to see yer when she gives herself to Nat. She allers thought a sight on yer ; she used to say to me, 'Mother, his bark is worse nor his bite.' Oh, Silas, you don't know what a load you has lifted from my 'eart."

"Look yere, missis," said Silas, "I won't go fer to deny that yer news has come to me sudden. Course, I know'd as Jill were to be married, but I never know'd as there were any hitch, so to speak. You might as well tell me what yer means, missis, for I takes a—a hinterest in the gel."

"I don't mind telling yer," said Poll. "May be it's best for yer to know. You see, it wor this way. I had an awful bad pain ; I wor suffering from a sort of a tumour in my breast, and I can't tell yer, Silas, what the suffering were like ; it seemed to shrink me all up, and the only way I could get ease, day or night, was by taking a drop o' gin. Sometimes I took perhaps mor'n I ought, and once or twice I know I forgot myself, and the sperits seemed to go into my 'ead ; and what with the ease from pain, and the light, cheery sort of feeling in my 'ead, I

used to sing songs in the street, and even dance, and folks collected round me, and I brought shame to my pretty, sweet gel. Oh, the goodness of her, and the tenderness of her, and the way she'd shield me and not let anybody point a finger at me; and the way she'd make s'cuses for me, and try to hush it up, and never let me even say to her as I had took a drop too much. Well, she engaged herself to Nat; it's about a month ago now; and they two did look so 'appy; and Jill she says to me, 'I'm his till death us do part;' and oh, the look in her beautiful eyes, and the strength on her true, sweet face, and the way he looked at her, and he says, says he, 'the only thing I want in a woman is to be honest, and sober, and true.' He said the words bitter 'ard, and I said to myself, 'I can't keep sober, but I won't bring disgrace on Jill; Nat Carter shan't have it to say as he married the best gel in life only she had a drunkard for a mother.' So I slipped away unbeknown to Jill, and I have never seen her since the day as she give herself to Nat. But three days arterwards I met Susy, Nat's sister, and she said words to me what made me fear as Nat had found out 'bout me, and that he were taking it bitter 'ard, and that, maybe, he had broke off with Jill. Oh, you don't know what I felt, Silas Lynn. To give the gel up, and yet not to save her arter all! Oh, I thought as my 'ead 'ud turn crazy. I tried to go back to her, and I s'pose I fainted in the street, for I don't

remember nothink more until I found myself yere. I had an awful dread of hospitals, but my word, Silas, I made a big mistake. Why, they has took that awful, fearful tumour right away, and I han't a bit of pain now, and they say as I'll get well again. There's news for Jill on her wedding morning."

"Yes, that's good news," replied Lynn, still speaking in that quiet, absent sort of voice. "Shall I tell her as you'll soon be quite well and back with her again, neighbour?"

"Oh, ef you would," said Poll; "and there'll be no need for Nat to fear me now, for I won't be tempted to take the awful drink. I wor a sober enough woman afore the pain troubled me, and now that the pain's gone I'll be sober enough again, never fear. Ef Jill has kept the secret 'bout me fro' Nat Carter, she can always keep it fro' him in the future. Wot's the matter, Silas Lynn? Yer face has gone grey-like, and I thought how well you looked when you wor coming across the ward to see me."

"So I am well," retorted Silas; "I'm as right as rain. Now, good-bye, neighbour, I must be goin'. Ef I see Jill I'll take her your message. Good-bye, neighbour, good-bye."

He left the ward, still treading on tiptoe, but with a certain heaviness in his gait which was not observable when he came in.

He went down-stairs, and out into the brilliant sunshine. The hospital ward was cool and fresh.

Outside there was a glare over everything. For the first time in his life Silas felt as if he might have sunstroke, or as if the fierce heat might mount to his brain and give him fever. He had not yet realised in all its intensity the blow which had fallen on him ; he was only dimly aware that the happiness which had come so late in life to take up its abode in his heart had found that dull room within him not large enough nor bright enough, and so had gone away. He was aware of this, still he went on making his preparations for to-morrow's wedding. He ordered the necessary foods to be sent down to Kent for the wedding feast ; he bought a bonnet for old Aunt Hannah, and some cheap gimcracks to present to Mary Ann Hatton and Mrs. Hiberty Jones.

At last he had finished his list of commissions, and he stood still for a minute to consider what he should do. He was not going to market to-morrow, so it was not necessary for him to return home early. It had been his intention to go back to the little cottage at Newbridge, in order to get it more completely ready for the sweet bride who was to enter it on the morrow. His flowers wanted extra watering and extra care in order to greet that one brilliant living blossom who was going to take root and settle down in their midst. Silas thought of encircling the porch of the cottage with a wreath of roses, of decking the table with which the wedding-feast would be spread with flowers in many strange and lovely devices ; but

the wish to do any of these things had now suddenly left him. He determined not to go home at present. He had a dim sort of consciousness that his pain would be much greater at home even than it was here.

Standing at the shady side of the street, leaning up against the door of a restaurant, he tried to bring his brain to think connectedly of Mrs. Robinson's words. He recalled them with an effort, and found that they amounted to the fact that Jill loved another man ; that she had engaged herself to him before she engaged herself to Silas ; that whereas Silas was old and ugly, Jill's other lover was young, and comely to behold. There was no doubt whatever that something was troubling Jill. The facts were but too patent—she had some secret motive in consenting to wed Silas, but her heart was still with Nat.

Having brought himself to face this fact, Silas thought carefully over Jill's possible motives. He remembered her great anxiety to borrow five pounds from him. He recalled, with a hot flush of misery, the startled look on her face when he first told her of the conditions on which he would give her the money. He remembered then her journey into Kent, her readiness to comply with his request, and her painful anxiety to have the money to take away with her, and to have no questions asked.

"I yielded at the time," thought Silas, "but I'm blessed ef I won't get at the bottom o' this thing afore the day's out. I'll go and see Jill, and question

her. We ain't wedded yet, and I'll know the truth afore we're made man and wife."

Having made up his mind, Silas acted with promptitude. He was not long in reaching Howard's Buildings. He ran swiftly up the stairs, and knocked at Jill's door. She was not expecting to see him again until they met the next day in Kent. There was a possibility that she might be out, but he must take his chance of that. He knocked with his knuckles on the panel of the door and waited. Partly to his relief, partly to add to his torture, he heard a light step within, and Jill came and opened the door. She started, and flushed slightly, when she saw him. There was a certain amount of pleasure in her face. She had evidently learned to lean upon Silas, to appreciate much that was in him.

"I'd ha' thought a few hours back as that look meant the tender dawning o' love," thought the man, "but I know better now."

"Come in, Silas," said Jill, speaking in that gentle tone which she always used when addressing him. "I wor packing my few bits o' duds, and I'm sorry the place is in a mess; but come in and set down, do."

Silas entered, and closed the door behind him. He did not intend to say anything about Mrs. Robinson. He had no notion of betraying the secret which had come to him at present. Still, the heaviness of his heart was shown by his absence of compliment, by his indifference to the disordered condition of the room,

He sat heavily down on the first chair he came to, and laid a big hand on each knee.

"I ha' come to have a little talk with yer, Jill," he said.

"Yes, Silas, of course. Is anything the matter, dear Silas?"

"No, my gel, there's nought the matter. Only somehow, when a man takes the sort of step I'm about to take—when a man takes a young gel to his 'eart, and swears afore the Lord God Almighty to love her and cherish her, and cling only to her—why, ef he's a man whose word is worth anythink, he feels kind o' solemn, Jill."

"Oh, yes," said Jill; "but when a man's like you, Silas Lynn, he's quite sure to keep his word; he needn't be fretted 'bout what's quite sure."

Silas gazed straight up at Jill while she was speaking, and a queer, very mournful smile lingered round his lips.

"Yer think, then, Jill," he said, "as I'd make a real good mate to yer?"

"I do, Silas."

"Yer know as I loves you, my gel."

"Yes, Silas, yes." Her own lips began to tremble. She turned away.

"Jill," continued Silas, "there's a weight on my mind, and I must speak, or I'll die. It's a weight o' love, little gel. I'm a rough man, and I has had a rough life. 'Cept the flowers, I never has had to do

with anything soft or dainty. I cared for my mother, in course, and she wor good as good could be ; but she worn't like you, Jill, with the skin o' a peach, and the look of all the loveliest flowers made by God Almighty put together. You came to me, Jill, and when you put your little 'ands into mine, then I knowed what love were. It's a mighty thing, Jill, for any girl to get all the love of a strong man like me—the love that has been gathering up in me for close on forty year. Some folks, they love dozens o' people ; they'll give a little love to this one, and t'other one—they, so to speak, splits up their love. But that ain't me. In all the wide wide world I love no one but you, little Jill, so you can guess as you has got something strong—when you has won the love o' a man like me."

Silas's words came out with slow pauses, they seemed to be wrung from him. His eyes were fixed upon the girl he was addressing. She turned paler and paler as he spoke. When he stopped, she burst into tears.

"Silas," she said, "I wish as you wouldn't love me in that sort of awful way——"

"I can't help it, my dear ; it's all with me, or it's nought."

"Silas, you frighten me."

"I don't want to, my pretty little dove. I won't talk o' it too much arter we is wedded, but I jest had to speak up to-day. Jill, the sort o' love I can

give 'ud go down into hell itself for the sake of sary-ing the one it loves. I've been thinking, my little darlin', of you, and wondering ef maybe you hadn't some things as yer'd like to tell me afore we were wed. Love makes us see deep down, and I can guess as you've a trouble, little Jill; maybe it's 'bout your mother, or maybe it's 'bout that five pounds as I giv'd yer. I know I ha' no right to ask 'bout the five pounds, but, ef you felt yerself free to tell me, why, I'd like to say that ef you had the blackest secret that ever come to a gel to keep, why it 'ud be all the same to me, I'd love yer jest all the same."

"I don't think I ought to tell," said Jill. "It wor a secret, and you mind, Silas, as it were part of the bargain that I shouldn't tell yer wot I wanted the money for, and that you shouldn't ask no questions."

"I won't, Jill, ef you'd rayther not tell," said Silas. "I'd like to know. Afore we stood up in the presence of God, and promised to be true to each other, I'd like well to know anythink as wor troubling yer. For look yere, little Jill, it ain't you as has done wrong—it ain't you as has a secret to hide—but maybe there are some belonging to yer as yer wants to shield. Well, Jill, you *can't* shield 'em no better way than by telling me, wot is to be yer husband, the whole truth."

While Silas was speaking, Jill's face underwent a queer change. It was as if a heavy and very dark

mantle of care had dropped from it. She looked up at Silas with a sort of solemn reverence.

"I b'lieve as you're a good man," she said. "I b'lieve as you're the best man I ever met."

"And yer'll trust me, Jill?"

"I will, Silas, I'll trust yer." She sat down as she spoke, and crossed her hands in her lap. "I'll tell yer about the money," she continued. "I know as yer'll never bring it up to me nor to mine, and, besides, I need name no names. It were this way. A few days afore I come to ask yer to lend me some flowers, a friend—one I thought a sight on, one I—I *loved*, Silas—give me five pounds to keep faithful, werry faithful, for a mate of his. I put the money into an old stocking with some savings of my own. I was quite light in my heart then, and werry happy. I hadn't known no trouble then. One morning I got up with the glad heart of a bird inside o' me. I went into the kitchen jest where you and me is now, and I prepared to go to the market. As I were leaving the house, I 'membered I had no money in my pocket. I went to the bureau. There I found that the old stocking had been opened by some one, and all the money—all my savings, and the five pounds wot my friend had give me to take care for for his pal were gone. There was a letter on the top of the bureau telling me who had took the money. The money—all the money—was took away by some one else wot I loved werry dear. You may s'pose,

Silas, as I felt near mad. I wouldn't and I couldn't betray the friend wot took the money to the friend wot trusted me with it. That night the one who gave me the money to keep came and asked for it back. I put a test to him, and I saw he could never bear the shock o' knowing the truth, so——"

Jill paused, there was a break in her voice, she threw her apron over her head.

"So?" continued Silas.

"I let him go," she added.

"And you come to me, little Jill?"

"I did, Silas; I come to you."

"And I give yer the money, and asked no questions?"

"You did, you did."

"And to-morrow we'll be made man and wife afore God?"

"Yes, Silas, that's so."

"You b'lieve as I loves yer, Jill? You b'lieves in the strength of my love?"

"I do, Silas."

"Well, that's all. You has told me wot were in your heart, and you'll never be sorry. Now I must be gwine home. I'll send the waggon up for you to-morrow, and Aunt Hannah in it. And you'll come down to me, faithful and true?"

"In course I will, Silas."

"Well, kiss me now. Give me a kiss of your own free will. Jest say over to yourself—'By this time

to-morrow Silas Lynn will be my husband, and I his wife. And Silas loves me.' Say them words over, werry solemn-like, to yourself, Jill, and then kiss me. There ain't nothin' in all the world I wouldn't do for you, my little gel."

Jill raised her face. She lifted her velvety, rose bud lips to the man's rough cheek. He caught her to him with frantic eagerness, pressed one kiss in return on her forehead, and left her, stumbling awkwardly out of the room, as though he were blind.





CHAPTER XVII.



HEN Silas returned to the cottage late that evening, he found Jonathan waiting for him with an expectant expression on his face.

"I ha' redd up the whole place, master," he said, "and brushed the path from the wicket up to the porch and I ha' watered the flowers, and I think there ain't nothink more to be done. Everythink is quite ready. I thought as you'd like me to put the place in order, seeing as you was late in comin' home, master."

"It's all right, Jonathan," said Silas in a gentle voice.

"Maybe as you'd like to look round, and see how I ha' done it for yourself, master?"

"No, no, Jonathan, it's safe to be all right; you can go home now, you're a good lad, and yere's half-a-crown for yer." Jonathan pulled his forelock in

acknowledgment of this bounty and turned to leave the little flower farm. As he was walking down the path Lynn called after him. "I s'pose," he said, "that Henry Best wor round to see arter the packing of the waggon."

"Yes, master, it's all ready, and Best 'll start the horses to market at one o'clock in the morning."

"You call at his cottage," said Lynn, "and tell him as I'll be taking a seat into town with him."

"You, master." Jonathan opened his wide mouth in amazement. "Why, I *thought*—"

"Never mind what yer thought," thundered Lynn after him, "do as yer're *told*, and make yerself scarce."

Jonathan quickened his steps, and Lynn very slowly entered the little cottage. A great many changes had taken place in the dingy room which acted both as kitchen and parlour. There was plenty of daylight still, and Lynn looked round at all his preparations. The two small lattice windows had been subjected to such an ordeal of soap and water, that each tiny pane shone in the evening light like a jewel. There was a clean new dimity curtain hung up before each window. The walls of the room had received a fresh coat of colour wash, the floor was nearly covered by the large gaily-striped rug which had called forth Aunt Hannah's indignation, the new mahogany table gave a solid and handsome appearance to the centre of the room, the new cane chair, with a striped grey and red tidy thrown over

its back, had an inviting appearance. The little china cupboard, too, had been put up on the wall, and the gold and white china with the blue convolvulus pattern had been so arranged within it as to show to the best possible advantage. The old arm-chair in which Lynn's mother had lived and died still kept its solemn position by the hearth. It was a high-backed chair with a shallow seat ; it had a hard Puritanical look about it, and seemed to Lynn's excited imagination now to frown at the gay new things which were brought for the bonny girl-bride who was to take possession of the little home to-morrow.

"Ah ! it's a blow," murmured Lynn, seating himself on the edge of a plain deal chair, and looking round the room. "I ha' got to make the best of it, but it's an awful blow. Jill'll marry me of course ef I'll have her, but the question is this, shall I have her? I has got to settle that pint atween myself and the Lord God Almighty to-night." Some bread and cheese was ready in the cupboard for Lynn's supper, the cupboard door stood partly open, and he could see the brown loaf and the cheese from where he sat. He had eaten nothing since the morning, but the sight of food in his present state turned the strong man sick ; he rose, and going to little cupboard shut the door and turned the key in the lock. "I thought as the Lord had given over a-chastening o' me," he said, "I wor mistook. Oh, this yere's an awful blow. I can take that young

gel to wife to-morrow, but her 'eart won't be mine, her 'eart 'll be another's. Oh, this yere is a blow. Lord God, it seems kind o' cruel that I should jest have had such a short bit of happiness, and then for it all to go. Now shall I read my Bible to-night or shall I not?"

Lynn paced up and down the tiny cottage while he thought. The sun set in the heavens, and the summer twilight, which could scarcely be called darkness, set in. He did not light his lamp nor draw his curtains; the darkness, which was not quite darkness after all, soothed him; he found it easier to face the great problem which had come to him in the dim uncertain light. Jill was quite ready to marry him—should he marry her and say nothing about what he knew? He loved her so intensely that he felt almost positive of his power to make her happy, he would give up his whole life to her, she should mould him and direct him, she should guide him with her gentle little hands. It would be impossible for her to be unhappy living among the sweet flowers in his garden, and surrounded by his great, mighty love.

"Yes, I love her fit to die for her," he muttered. As he said these words, a thought swept over him, like a flash; he remembered a certain verse in the old Bible, "*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*" "My God," he exclaimed aloud, "it's easy to say as I'd die fur Jill, but it's hard, hard to do it. I can take

her to-morrow for better for worse, and *live for her*, but that ain't the pint. Seems to me as the Lord wants to prove my love for that little Jill by a sort of being crucified for her. I'm to give up myself and give her to another. Is that what I has got to do, Lord? To kill my pleasure and my 'appiness, is that the way I'm to show my love for little Jill?"

"*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*" The words seemed to echo through the silent room, as if they fell from the skies. Silas staggered to the window, pulled the lattice pane open, flung himself on his knees, and looked up at the summer sky. "It's bitter, bitter hard, Lord," he muttered.

He was not comforted by any thought of the nobleness of the sacrifice. He grovelled on the ground, and clenched his hands and tore his hair. "I can't do it, I can't do it, I won't do it," he muttered, but these words of defiance came at longer and longer intervals. The quiet, persistent voice kept on sounding in his ears, "*Greater love—greater love hath no man.*" He could not bear the sound at last, he pressed his hands to his ears and ran out of the cottage.





CHAPTER XVIII.

“**W**ELL, I am surprised to see you at the market this morning, Silas Lynn,” said Molly Maloney, who had come to stock her basket with fresh flowers, and who came across Lynn standing moodily by one of the stalls. “Why, ain’t this yer wedding-day?—but glory be to heaven, man, how blue you looks! Where’s Jill? Is anything wrong with the bit of a colleen?”

“No,” said Lynn, “there’s nothing wrong with Jill; she’s comin’ down to me presently, and there’ll be a weddin’ sure enough, don’t you make no mistake on that pint, Mrs. Maloney; but I’m standing here a-looking out for a young chap o’ the name o’ Carter. Do you happen to know, ma’am, ef he’s come to the market yet?”

“Him as used to keep company with Jill?” exclaimed Mother Maloney; “yes, I seen him ’arf an

hour ago a-buying young peas and other vegetables for his barrer; he were round by the south door and—" But Lynn had left her.

He strode rapidly in the direction the Irishwoman had pointed out. His hands were stuck deep in his pockets; his great sullen shoulders were raised almost to his ears; the old ferocious look was once more observable on his brow and round his mouth.

Nat Carter had nearly concluded his purchases when he felt a heavy hand laid on his shoulder; he looked swiftly round and came face to face with Lynn.

Nat coloured high when he perceived the person who had touched him. A swift wave of crimson dyed his cheeks and broad, white brow, then it receded, leaving the young fellow pale as death. His blue eyes flashed angrily at Lynn, his lips were firmly shut, he clenched his fist, and waited for the other to begin.

"You ha' heard," said Lynn, who noticed these quick changes in the young costermonger's face with a sort of grim satisfaction; "you ha' heard, in course, that I'm a-gwine to wed that pretty little flower gel, Jill Robinson, this arternoon."

"It's true, I ha' heard," replied Nat; "I don't want to speak on it, Silas Lynn. I'm werry busy just now a-packing my barrer, and as you and me can't have naught in common, I'll be wishing yer a good morning."

"But we can have a deal in common, lad," exclaimed Silas; "why, what a chicken 'eart you has, turning faint when a gel's name is spoke!"

"Ef you say that again I'll knock yer down," said Nat.

"Oh, tut, tut, ain't I twice yer age nearly, and a good bit more than twice yer strength? Look yere, Nat Carter, I want to talk this matter over with you. I ha' heard something 'bout you and Jill what must be cleared up afore I take her afore the parson. I want to do wot's right and jest by that yere gel. Your 'appiness ain't nothing to me, Nat Carter; and my own 'appiness! well, the Lord knows as that ain't worth considerin' either. But Jill's 'appiness, that's everything. You and me 'as got to argufy that pint out werry clear, young man."

Nat did not reply for a moment or two, then he said in a slow voice,

"I had made a vow in my heart that I'd never speak the name o' that young gel, Jill Robinson, again," he murmured. "I heard as she were about to be spliced up with you, Mr. Lynn, and I said to myself I 'opes as I'll never meet that old man, Silas Lynn, or maybe I'll be doin' him a mischief. I don't want to meet yer, or to speak with yer, nor to hear anything more 'bout Jill. It's quite true as I dreamt a dream that there wor a gel o' that name, what could be all the world to me. I woke one arternoon and there worn't no sech Jill nowhere on God's wide



"Ef you say that again I'll knock yer down."

earth. I don't want to speak to you about the gel you're gwine to marry, Mr. Lynn."

"Not ef I tell yer somethink that'll prove to yer as the Jill you dreamt on is still living on this earth, sweeter and brighter nor the best and the purtiest sweet spring flower; ef I proves that to yer, will yer come along and talk with me, Nat Carter?"

A queer, convulsive change came over Nat's face when Silas said these words. He hesitated for a moment.

"I—I'll come," he said then. "I didn't think as I could be such a weak fool, but somehow I don't know myself lately."

He called to a tall, slight lad who stood near, gave him some directions with regard to the vegetables and fruit he had just bought, and turned with Lynn to leave the market.

The two men turned down a side street and entered a small restaurant, which was nearly empty at this early hour. Lynn called to the girl who stood behind the counter to bring coffee for two, and then walked with Carter into the back room, which they had absolutely to themselves.

"There can't be no smooth words between you and me to-day, Nat Carter," said Lynn, turning suddenly and facing the younger and slighter man. "The facts of the case are these. This yere is my wedding day. I'm about to contract marriage with a young gel not seventeen year old, and I—you're pleased to call me

an old man, Nat Carter, and I don't deny as I'll see forty years come two more summers. But a man of my age is in his prime. You young 'uns think to laugh at us, but there ain't no laughing in these muscles," here Lynn doubled his brawny arm, "nor in this yere chest, nor in these legs, nor in this fist. I feel pretty sartin' as this yere fist o' mine 'ud knock a slim, straight young feller like you into kingdom come, Nat Carter. There's nothing o' decay 'bout me, although you think fine to call me old. My strength is in its prime—and my passions, my love, and my hate, why *they're* in their prime too. I tell yer, Carter, that the love of a young feller like you ain't nothing to the love o' a man like me—but that ain't the pint—wot am I talking on? Come and set down here, Carter, and let me speak quietly to yer."

"I don't know why you have dragged me in yere," said Carter; "I wor busy with my work; I don't want yer to flaunt yer 'appiness in my face."

"Will you have anything to eat with the coffee, gentlemen?" said the girl who brought it in.

"Nothing—go," thundered Lynn; she disappeared quickly, and Silas turned to Carter.

"Poor lad," he said in an almost pitying tone, "you talk o' me flaunting my 'appiness in yer face—I must be awful full o' malice to do a thing o' that sort. You wait awhile, Carter, and see how the tables 'ull turn presently. As I wor saying, this yere is my weddin'-day—I and that little gel with the

dark eyes and the sweet look, and the scent of the wild flowers 'bout her, wor to be spliced up afore the pa'son to-day. Oh, I wor 'appy—the Lord God Almighty knows as I wor a'most too 'appy to live. Yesterday it seemed to me as ef I trod on air—oh, what wouldn't I ha' done for my little gel! But, yesterday, Carter, 'appiness and me said good-bye to one another. Now you listen, young man, your turn is a-comin'. I went yesterday to St. Bartholomey's Hospital to take a parcel to a sick neighbour. As I wor leaving the ward a woman screeched out to me; I turned, and who should I see but Jill's mother, Poll. Ah, you may well start, young man, but you wait awhile, there's more to come. I went up to that woman, and she spoke to me and arsked had I seen Jill. I said, 'Yes.' She arsked, 'Is Jill 'appy?' I said 'yes' again to that. Then I added, looking 'ard at her, 'It 'ud be queer ef Jill worn't 'appy seeing as she's to be wed to-morrow.'

“‘Oh, thank the good Lord,’ said Poll; ‘I’m real glad to hear that. I was frightened as she and Nat Carter wouldn’t wed one another.’ You may suppose, young man, as I turned a bit sick and queer when I hear’d words o’ that sort. I jest knew you as a likely chap what bought wegetables in the market. I had never hear’d you and Jill spoke on as keeping company. I had to steady myself a bit; but I spoke quite quiet, and got Poll to tell me all that wor in her ’eart. Seems to me, young man,

that you're a person with mighty little o' the quality what pious folks call *faith*; seems to me as you're but chicken-hearted in your love. However, to my tale. Poll said as you and Jill had allers loved each other ever since you was kids, and that when she saw Jill last, you and she had made up yer minds to get spliced to one another as soon as pa'son could be found to tie yer up. Well, poor Poll she had an ugly secret, and she was mortal feared o' your finding it out. Jill knowed o' it, but Poll didn't want you ever to know. She said you wor good, but a bit 'ard, and you wouldn't have naught in the world to do with any gel what worn't honest and sober and true. Jill wor honest and sober and true; but Poll herself, poor soul, suffered awful pain fro' a bad sort of tumour in her breast, and she tuk gin on the quiet to ease it. She made no bones o' it to me that she often got drunk to ease the pain, and Jill know'd it, although she wouldn't let on. Well, when you and Jill said as you'd become man and wife, Poll thought as she'd run away, so as you'd never hear of her and never find out as Jill wor the daughter of a woman as drank. She was in an awful takin' as you'd hear'd of the news, for yer sister met her and said some cruel words, and it wor a real load off her mind when I told her as Jill wor to be married to-day; she made sure, in course, as the bridegroom wor to be you.

"I left the hospital without having let out one

single thing 'bout myself. It don't matter to you, young man, how I felt. I thought over everythink; and I went to see Jill. Afore I spoke to her mother I made sure as the pretty bit of a cuttin' wor a-taking real root in my 'eart; but arter I heard Poll's story, I made jest as sure as she never cared for me; she only married me to save herself. To make a long story short, it seems that you give her five pounds to take care on for a pal o' yourn. Well, she lost the money—I make no doubt, from what I draw'd out of her, that her mother stole it. She come to me to ask me to lend her five pounds. I said I'd give it to her ef she'd wed me. She said no at first; but the next morning early she come all the way down to my bit of a cottage in Kent and said yes as she would wed me ef I'd give her the five pounds and arsk no questions. You may well look queer, Nat Carter. You ask your own 'eart what you did to make a gel like Jill give yer up, and be too frightened to tell yer the truth. Look at me—I'm rough enough, 'eaven knows—but do yer think she'd be frightened to arsk me anythink? No, no; that ain't Jill. And now the pint to be decided on is, What's best for her 'appiness?"





CHAPTER XIX.



VEN the humblest abode can look gay and bright when it is decked all over with flowers, and when the windows look out on gay gardens and blooming plants, and take in also distant peeps of lovely country. Kent has been well called the garden of England, and that part where Silas Lynn lived, and where his little flower farm was, was as brilliant and as rich in all kinds of vegetation as any spot in the whole of the county.

Aunt Hannah Royal was, as she expressed it, in every event "all one thing or t'other." She either went with all her heart and soul for a person, or she determined to oppose them with equal vigour. There was nothing half-hearted about her, she could never have been called in any sense of the word lukewarm. She had come to Silas's cottage with the full intention of opposing his marriage with Jill, and, if pos-

sible, preventing it. She had left the cottage on the first night of her interview considerably softened in her views with regard to things in general. She had made up her mind to see Jill before she took any more steps against her. She had also made up her mind that the tea-drinking out of that delicate "chaney" should prove a success.

When Jill arrived, and when shortly afterwards she echoed Aunt Hannah's sentiments with regard to the lovely cups and saucers, the old woman's heart was completely won. She ceased to oppose Silas's marriage. She kissed him when she next saw him, and told him that the "gel wor a sweet-looking gel, and she made no doubt as she'd be humble and teachable, and willing to learn, not only of her husband, but of her Aunt Hannah."

"Then, Aunt Hannah," said Silas, "you'll undertake the wedding feast, won't you?"

Aunt Hannah decided that she would, and the next morning she came to live at the cottage, and spent every instant of her time preparing the eatables, without which no wedding in her opinion could be properly solemnized.

A few of the village folks had been asked to meet the bride at Silas's little cottage. The whole party were then to walk to church together, and afterwards, late in the evening, Silas and his wife were to go away by train to the nearest sea-side place.

This was the little programme which Aunt Hannah Royal devoutly believed was to be carried out.

Mary Ann Hatton, Mrs. Hibberty Jones, another neighbour of the name of Ann Spires, and two or three men, were all waiting in the little parlour when Silas appeared leading Jill by the hand.

The little bride wore a new print dress with a tiny spray of rosebuds all over it. Her beautiful hair was bound tightly round her head, but in spite of all her careful brushing, some tendrils would get loose. She wore no ornament of any kind, not even a flower from Silas's garden. As he took her hand and led her into the midst of his friends, she looked at him as if expecting the gay bouquet which he had promised her. He took no notice of her questioning gaze, however, but, leading her forward, stood before the expectant company.

"Neighbours and friends," he said, "I ha' to thank you for coming here to-day. You have known me, most of you, for many years, and I'm sure you are all willing and proud to look on at the great 'appiness which it seems to you I'm 'bout to have."

When Silas said these words, old Peters made a profound bow to the bride.

"There ain't no doubt on the pint of *your* 'appiness, Silas," he said.

"I don't think there is any doubt," answered Silas, with a queer look on his face. "Ef I wor to take

this young gel to my 'eart it'd be all the same as ef I wor back again in the spring-time of life. The gladness and the lightness of youth would come back to me. Summer's all very well," continued Silas, looking round at his friends, "but for gaiety there's no time like spring. Now this young gel is in the early spring, and I, neighbours, I'm a man as is enjoying of his late summer. I'm full blown, and this yere young gel is a bud. Now which, neighbours, would you say wor the most valuable from the market gardener's pint of view, the bud or the flower wot's come to its maturity?"

"I allers set store by buds," said Mary Ann Hatton, in her tart voice. "There's a sight o' promise 'bout 'em, and we know as the full-blown flower have *had* its day; but I'm meaning no disrespect to you, Silas."

"No more you are, Mary Ann, and I'm obleeged for a plain answer. Now that pint's clear. The bud's more valuable nor the full-blown flower. Neighbours, I'm glad to see yer, for I ha' got a case for you all to decide. I didn't think as there wor sech a decision to be made when I asked yer to my wedding, but circumstances has arose sence I last saw any of yer, wot makes it but fair that this young gel should get your mature opinion."

"Wot is it, Silas?" asked Jill, suddenly turning round and looking at him. "I ha' come down yere to wed yer; it ain't no affair of anyone's but yours

and mine. Maybe we ought to be going to the church, Silas ; maybe it's 'bout time."

"Hark to the little cuttin'" said Silas, with a harsh, troubled laugh ; "you can't none of yer say, neighbours, as she ain't willin'. Now, my little dearie, you let Silas speak. I ha' thought it all out, and I means to put the case to my good friends here. I think they has already answered me, but I'll put the question once more. Neighbours all, ef one of us two could only be made 'appy by this yere wedding, which is to be most considered, the bud or the full-blown flower ?"

"It's a wery queer question," said Peters, "but, in course, we must give it for the bud, Silas."

"No, I don't see nothink of the sort," exclaimed Aunt Hannah. "Silas Lynn is a man of family ; he comes of a pious stock, what tuk great care of their chaney, and mended their carpets, and polished up their furniture. Silas's mother, what died of the asthmey, were as God-fearing and 'spectable a woman as wore shoe leather. Silas comes of a good stock, and that, in a case of weddin', is much to be considered. I'm not saying anythink agen that young gel ; she has right opinions, and she can be trained ; but when all's said and done, she's a London gel, and she's in rare luck to get Silas."

"That's wot I think, Aunt Hannah," said Jill ; she went up to Silas as she spoke and linked her hand in his arm. "I'm not ashamed to say, Silas,"

she continued, looking him full in the face with a great tenderness filling her eyes, "that I love yer better each day. I'm abundantly willing to marry yer, Silas."

"Thank you, my little gel," said Silas. "Thank you, too, Aunt Hannah, but in a case like the present a man must judge for himself. I'll ask yer now one plain question, Jill; Look solemn into yer 'eart, my gel, and tell me true as you wor standing afore the angels, is there no man on this 'arth what you love better nor me? You answer me that pint werry plain. Do you love me, Silas Lynn, better nor anyone else on God's wide 'arth?"

Silas's words, his attitude, the piercing way he looked at Jill had a great effect on all the visitors. Even Aunt Hannah began to feel that there was more in all this talk than appeared on the surface. As for Jill herself, she turned first pale, then rosy red. After a very short pause she said in a queer tone:

"I couldn't tell yer a lie to-day, Silas. I can only say, let by-gones be by-gones, and I can faithfully promise afore God Almighty to make yer a good wife."

"But I won't have yer for a wife ef you don't love me best of all," said Silas. "Wait one moment, Jill. There's someone else to have a say in this yere." He walked across the room and flung the door open. "Come in, Nat Carter, and speak for yerself," he called out. "Ef Jill can say as she loves

me more than you, why I'll ~~take~~ her to church and wed her. Ef not—now, Nat, come in and speak, man."

There was a little buzz amongst the guests. Mary Ann Hatton was heard to say afterwards that she never felt nearer fainting in her life. She uttered a little gasp which no one heard; Aunt Hannah gave a snort which no one listened to. All the pairs of eyes were fixed on the handsome straight-looking young man who came into the room, who blushed as deeply as Jill did, and walked at once to her side.

"Jill," he exclaimed, "there never wor such a noble fellow as this yere Silas Lynn. He ha' put a deal o' things straight 'tween you and me this morning, and if you still loves me best, why, sweetheart——"

"Oh, Nat, I do, I do, I can't help it," exclaimed poor Jill. She flung herself into her lover's arms, who kissed her passionately on her brow and lips.

"Take her out for a bit into the garden," whispered Silas in a hoarse voice to the young man; "go away, both on yer, for a little, while I 'splain things to the neighbours."





CHAPTER XX.



THE moon and the stars have some advantages which mankind in times of perplexity would gladly possess. For instance, they can take a bird's-eye view of events ; from their lofty standpoint they can look down on more than one place at a time in this small world. Doubtless things of immense and overpowering importance to us assume their juster proportions from this immeasurable distance.

On the night which should have been Silas Lynn's wedding night, there was a clear sky, the moon was at its full, and the stars shone in multitudes in the deep blue firmament. Amongst other things they looked down on a ship returning to its native shores. There were sailors on board of course, and many passengers, and, amongst others, a rather disconsolate, pale-faced, freckled boy, who sat on his bunk in the sailors' cabin, and rubbed his tear-stained, small eyes

with one dirty knuckle, while in his other hand he held a pen, and tried to scribble some words on a sheet of paper.

“Dear sister Jill,” he wrote, “this is to say that Tom and me has had a bad time of it. We are real sorry as we tuk the money, and then put the sin o’ it on mother. We don’t like being sailors, and we gets lots o’ cuffs, and Tom ran away at the last port. I ain’t coming ’ome, although the ship will be in England in twenty-four hours, ef the weather keeps fair ; but I write now to say as it was me and Tom tuk the money, all ’cept one pound ten what mother tuk when she ran away. This is to say, too, as I rubbed out mother’s writing on the letter, and put in the words that said she tuk it all. It worn’t mother ; it wor Tom and me. I believe the proverb now ’bout ill-gotten gains, for I’m very misribble.

“Your affectionate brother,
“BOB.”

Some tears dropped from Bob’s eyes on the crooked and ill-spelt writing ; but the letter got finished somehow, and, what is more, got into an envelope which bore the superscription, “Jill, Howard’s Buildings, Nettle Street, London.” A stamp was fixed on the envelope, and it was dropped into the ship’s letter-box, and in due course did reach Jill’s hands.

Several other characters have been introduced into

this story, and the moon and stars looked down on them all—on Poll, lying on her bed in the hospital ; on Susy Carter ; on Irish Molly Maloney. But perhaps those on whom the brilliant rays of that clear full moon shone with the deepest interest were Jill and Nat, who sat once again in the garden on the Embankment, and talked of their wedding-day. They were together and happy, and they said anew that they owed it all to Silas.

“ Who’d ha’ thought it ? ” said Nat ; “ and he looks so rough.”

But Jill would not even admit now that Silas was rough.

“ You don’t know what a tender ’eart he has, Nat ! ” she exclaimed. “ Ef he has a roughness, it’s only jest on the surface, and what matters that ? Oh, Nat, I’m quite positive sure that I’ll allers love Silas next best in the world to mother and you.”

For Silas himself, he stood at that moment by the porch in his little garden ; his arms were folded, his head was bare, the flowers lay sleeping at his feet, and the great glory and peace of the summer heavens surrounded him. There had been a tempest in his soul ; but even the fiercest storms have their limits, and this storm, though it might rend him again, was for the present succeeded by calm. It is true that his heart felt sadly bruised and sore.

“ I’m sort o’ empty,” he said to himself. “ I ain’t sorry, in course, as I done it. I might ha’ guessed

that the sweet little cuttin' couldn't take root yere," and he struck his breast with his great hand; "but all the same I'm sort o' empty."



"Fell asleep where he eat in Jill's chair."

He went back into the house, and shut the door behind him and sat down in the chair which he had bought for Jill; but the moonbeams still followed

him, and shone all over him as he sat near his lattice window.

"I ain't sorry I ha' done it," he repeated. "Lord, I'm willin' ; I'm a poor sort o' critter at best, but I'm *willin'* to do Thy will."

He sighed heavily several times, and at last, worn out from many emotions, fell asleep where he sat in Jill's chair.

There are compensations for all ; and, although Silas did not know it, he had risen out of the commonplace that day and was enrolled in heaven as one of God's heroes.



